



3

RUN THROUGH
THE BATTLEFRONT
(FINISH)

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO
ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

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YEN
ON
NEW YORK





Shin and Lena.

They take to
the battlefield,
each not
knowing the
other still lives.

And so they
fight on.

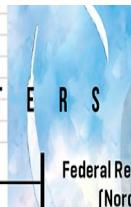
She
faces the
approaching
enemy,
while he
questions
his reason
to live.



And so the young girl brandishes her pistol to bid a final farewell to the person she once loved.

And at that moment, the metallic dragon undoubtedly gazed at his mistress, his empress.

CHARACTERS



Federal Republic of Glad Military
(Nordlicht Squadron)

Shin



A young man marked by the Republic of San Magnolia with the stigma of being a subhuman Eighty-Six. He possesses the ability to hear the "voices" of the Legion and is a pilot of remarkable skill who has survived countless battles.



EIGHTY-SIX

Frederica



An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Glad—the developers of the Legion. She cooperates with Shin and the Eighty-Six for the sake of defeating Kiriya, her former knight and brotherly guardian, who was assimilated by the Legion. She possesses the ability to peer into the past and present of those she knows.

Raiden



A young man of the Eighty-Six who found shelter in the Federacy along with Shin. An inseparable friend to Shin, Raiden saves him from isolation when the haunting voices of the Legion weigh upon him.

Kurena



A young woman of the Eighty-Six and an exceptionally skilled sniper. She harbors feelings for Shin, but will they ever be reciprocated...?

Theo



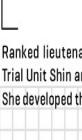
A young man of the Eighty-Six. A coolheaded cynic with a sharp tongue. He excels in high-mobility combat by moving about freely with the help of his wires.

Anju



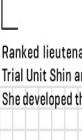
A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. She specializes in suppressing fire through the use of missiles.

Grethe



Ranked lieutenant colonel. Commands the 1,028th Trial Unit Shin and the Nordlicht squadron belong to. She developed the new type of Feldref, the Reginleif.

Bernholdt



A senior member of the Nordlicht squadron and its sergeant. He looks up to Shin as his commander despite being the older of the two and leads a platoon of mercenary Vargus into battle.

Eugene



A contemporary of Shin's from the special officer academy who kept in touch with him even after they both enlisted. He was fatally wounded during a Legion raid, and Shin, who happened upon him, was forced to put him to rest.

Federal Republic of Glad Military
(8th Army Corps)

Marcel

A friend of Eugene's. He blamed and verbally abused Shin for failing to save Eugene but was quieted down by a commanding officer.

Federal Republic of Glad

Ernst

Temporary president of the Federal Republic of Glad. He took in Shin and the surviving Eighty-Six as his adopted children after they fled the Republic. He appears cordial and serene but displays his true strength in the field of politics.

Former Empire of Glad

Kiriya

A distant relative of Shin's, he once served as Frederica's personal knight. Countless battles chipped away at his sanity, and as he was filled with hatred for the Federacy that cornered Frederica, he was assimilated by the Legion.

Republic of San Magnolia



Lena

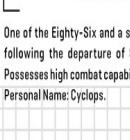
A Handler who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. She ordered an unauthorized firing of weapons to assist Shin and his friends as they set out on their final reconnaissance mission and was demoted from major to lieutenant as a result. She took command of the Republic's forces when the Legion brought down the Gran Mur.



Annette

A friend of Lena's and a technical lieutenant in charge of the Para-RAID system. In fact, she is a childhood friend of Shin's from before the Eighty-Six were banished outside of the eighty-five Sectors.

Shiden



One of the Eighty-Six and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. Possesses high combat capabilities.

Personal Name: Cyclops.

Karlstahl

A friend of Lena's father. Ranked commodore. Lena grows disillusioned with him after learning he did nothing despite being aware of the Republic's faults, resulting in her strengthened resolve to walk her chosen path.

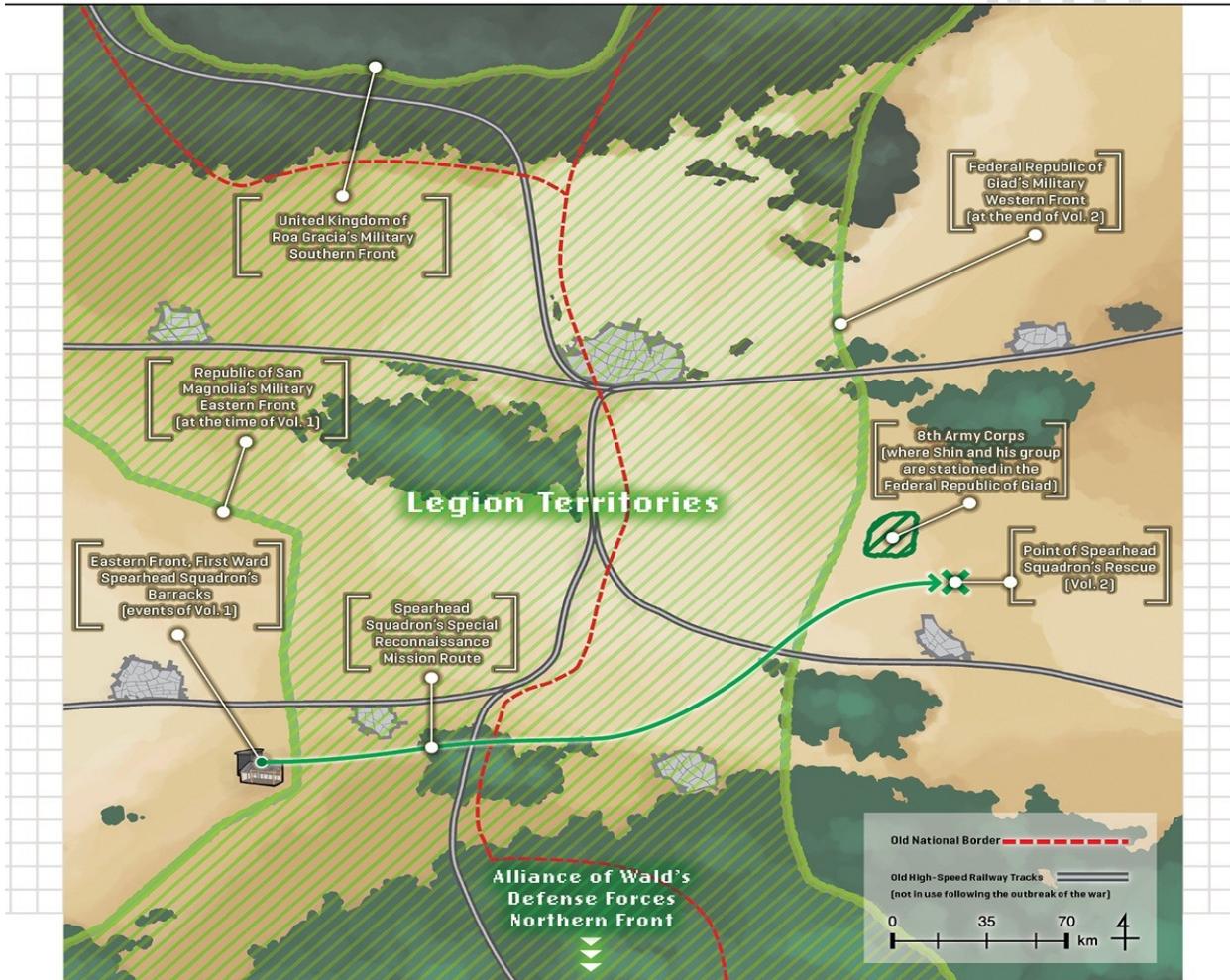
Character
Introductions

The word on everyone's lips was "Why?"
They couldn't know the answer.
asking why is an insult.

Life, Land, and Legacy
All reduced to a number.

Federal Republic of Giad Western Front

MAP



[SUMMARY]

The Federal Republic of Giad's western front consists of plains, without any contact with the sea. The battlefield is mostly forest. In the cold northern regions is the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, and in the warm south is the Alliance of Wald. Both countries make use of forests and mountainous terrain to keep the Legion's invasion in check.

Currently, the territories from the west of the federacy to the Republic of San Magnolia are completely under Legion control. However, the young men and women cast out by the Republic, known as the Eighty-Six, have successfully broken through and reached Federacy territory.

RAILGUN-TYPE LEGION'S APPEARANCE

While the eastern front's war situation has been improving over the years, the situation took a turn for the worse due to the large-scale Legion offensive and the subsequent long-range bombardment by the Railgun type from several hundred kilometers away. This weapon's firing range covers the entirety of the above map, and it is capable of moving along the old high-speed railway tracks to hit the central Sectors of each country. Until this weapon is dealt with, the human race remains under constant threat of extinction.

[map design] Tatsuya KURUSU

Copyright

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 3

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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They called it pride.

At the time, pride was all they knew.

—*FREDERICA ROSENFORT, RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BATTLEFIELD*

The crimson of those coquelicots that blossomed as far as the eye could see, illuminated by the sunset that burned all to nothing, was as beautiful as sheer madness.

The Republic's Eighty-Sixth Sector was located in the northern part of the continent and would often get chilly after sunset. Feeling the dusk wind snuff out the flames of war that had long burned across the battlefield, Shin watched the sky grow dim.

It had been a year since he was sent to the battlefield as a Processor of the Republic's unmanned drone—the Juggernaut. He'd grown used to this stillness. Once combat ceased, both friend and foe were equally reduced to nothing. This held true for every unit he had ever been a part of. The only thing that never changed was the silence left behind by his comrades who had fallen in battle. It had been like this for a year. He'd gotten used to it by now.

The smell of gunpowder and the roar of cannons scared away every animal in the vicinity, and so the silence of the battlefield was complete. Not a single creature's cry could be heard. Not even the chirping of crickets was audible as the world was bathed in evening light. The ghosts' unending wails still echoed in his ears, but even those felt distant now.

The Legion had retreated to their territories and would remain there again today. Being defenseless on the battlefield like this was an act of recklessness, but Shin wished to stay like this a while longer. He may have grown used to battle, but he was still only twelve. His body was still underdeveloped, not having reached adolescence yet. Fighting the Legion, especially after all his consort units fell halfway through the battle, was exhausting.

Undertaker. H-how many of you will be returning...?

Shin's gaze narrowed as the voice of that hypocritical Handler, unaware of their own status as a wretched white pig, surfaced in his memory.

It was a question that didn't need to be asked, much less answered.

In this battlefield without casualties, the death of the Processors—the death of the Eighty-Six—was natural law. It was Republic citizens, white pigs like this Handler, that ordered the Eighty-Six to fight and die in place of *real humans* while fortress walls and minefields obstructed their path of retreat. And should they survive in spite of their harsh conditions, they would be ordered to march to their deaths in the end.

Their parents and siblings died early, leaving them to grow up without the guidance and protection children desperately needed. The only universal constants were the meaningless deaths that awaited them and the scorn and hatred of Republic soldiers. Even from a young age, the Processors *knew* they were expected to die, and so they grew accustomed to the glare of encroaching death—be it a mere moment or five years away.

It was a bitter truth they had no choice but to accept.

If we gotta march to our deaths anyway, at the very least, it might not be so bad with our trusty Reaper there to guide us.

And with those words, each and every one of them left him behind.

Yes.

That might be right, he thought, his scarlet, bloodred eyes narrowing as they overlooked the heaven and earth that shared their vivid color.

The first unit Shin was assigned to was wiped out, leaving no one behind except for him. And the same held true for his next unit and the one he was assigned to right now. He was always the only one who survived. He'd become known as a monster that heralds death and hears the voices of ghosts, and he'd gotten used to that label. After all, it was probably true.

It's all your fault.

It was just like his brother once told him.

And though he'd said something so cruel, the final memory Shin had of him was of his back shrinking in the distance as he left Shin behind.

Shin reached a lonely hand up to the evening sky, knowing he could never reach it.

Brother... Why...?

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

86

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ASATO ASATO

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The word on everyone's lips was "Why?"
They couldn't know that for *them*,
asking why is an insult.

INTERLUDE

GET YOUR GUNS

Despite the fact that it was after lights-out, and no one but those on night patrol was awake, all surviving squadrons were connected to the Para-RAID. The implication made Lena bite her pink lower lip.

They had always been prepared for this.

For *this day* that would eventually come, when they would have to abandon the Republic to its foolish slumber and fight the impossibly massive tidal wave of Legion, however hopeless their prospects of victory may be. Perhaps they knew what the Reaper of the eastern front once foretold, or perhaps it was their own experience with fighting the Legion that guided them to this answer. But the proud Eighty-Six fought on, knowing today—the day of their deaths—would inevitably come.

For the time being, she requested the cooperation of all squadrons—to concentrate in the eighty-five Sectors and help defend them. She shut down the Resonance without taking the time to listen to their responses as she went toward the control room. Their responses didn't matter; if they had any intention of cooperating, they would make their way into the eighty-five Sectors. But before they could do that, she would have to deactivate the minefields in their way and open the gate of the Gran Mur.

She pressed her fingers against the bosom of her blackened uniform, against the inner pocket of her blouse.

She did this because that was what *they* wished for her to do, in the end.

But as she walked down the corridor, someone stood in the adjacent hallway.

“What do you mean to do, Lieutenant Vladilena Milizé?”

Lena turned around with a start, feeling a hand grip her arm, and practically growled the name of the man before her.

“Commodore Karlstahl...!”

Shaking free from his grip on her arm, she glared into his eyes as he stood a full head taller. This was the breaking point, the critical moment that would decide whether the Republic—whether the Eighty-Six and Lena—would live or die. She couldn't let this one trifling man, who willingly let himself be consumed by despair, stand in her way.

“I'm going to deactivate the minefield and open the gate of the Gran Mur... I will gather all the squadrons inside the Gran Mur and intercept the Legion. If we do that, we still have a chance of surviving...”

"Leave it. If they have to rely on calling the Eighty-Six for help, the Republic's citizens would be better off letting the Legion overtake them."

"At a time like this, you continue to spout such nonsense...?!"

He intended to adhere to the asinine rhetoric that the Alba were the only ones who counted as human beings and that the eighty-five Sectors were a paradise only for them? Even as his motherland teetered on the brink of ruin?!

"The Eighty-Six won't fight for the Republic."

That one sentence stung like a slap across the face.

"The Republic persecuted them, cast them out, and slaughtered them. They have an obligation to listen to our pleas for help... At most, they would sneer and say that we were getting what we deserved."

Lena gritted her teeth bitterly. That much was obvious.

"They may not be obligated to listen to us...but they still have a reason to. We have the power and the production plants they need. They survived this long on the battlefield, and they know if they intend to keep fighting, our survival is necessary."

Karlstahl's scar-ridden face grimaced, like he had just witnessed something unbearable.

"If only it were that simple... Yes, at first, they might remain compliant. But they'll soon realize that fighting on their own is much more preferable to defending these useless citizens who know only how to complain and demand."

"..."

"And what do you think will happen then? If all that awaited the Republic citizens was a massacre, we would be *lucky*. But you've studied history, Lena. You know the consequences won't be anything so *lenient*. Especially for a *young woman* like you."

Lena flinched for a moment, imagining the vivid implications of what he meant.

It was something she considered, of course. Having taken command of a combat squadron, she may have earned the trust of her troops to at least some degree. But from their perspective, before she was their Handler, she was a white pig first, hidden snugly away from harm. So once they were allowed within the walls, the Eighty-Six may just kill them—it was a possibility she was well aware of. And of course, there was the possibility that the violence would not be limited to murder.

Still...

Her hand touched the breast pocket of her blouse, where she kept a letter and a photograph stored preciously in a waterproof cover. She cherished them at all times, even as the Legion drew closer by the day. Because they were the final words and sentiments *they* had left her.

"Even so...I don't wish to sit idly by and wait for death. Even if I die, beaten and powerless, I will fight until the end."

Just as *they* lived and died. Shin and the others believed she could live that way, too, and she didn't want to put that faith to shame.

The two pairs of silver eyes clashed for a long moment—and it was Karlstahl who looked away first.

"As you wish, then."

He turned aside and began walking down the opposite end of the corridor. She noticed an assault rifle hanging heavily from his large back, suspended by a strap. It was an official Republic 7.62 mm caliber rifle. It was well maintained, but the model number on it was one digit lower than the type she knew: a semiauto three-round burst rifle. The type that had been used when Karlstahl was still in his youth.

The military issued rifles for the exclusive use of each of its soldiers, and both training and combat were done only with one's own gun. They were industry-produced assault rifles, but each gun had its own minute quirks, and it was done so each soldier could make that gun their own, flaws and kinks included. Which meant this rifle was the one Karlstahl had received in his youth, the one he'd used to fight the Legion a decade ago, and the one he carried with him to this day.

"Commodore...?!"

"Dreaming is a privilege afforded by youth, Lieutenant Milizé. And waking children up from their dreams...making them face the harshness of reality, and dying to defend those dreams...is the duty placed upon adults."

He loosened his necktie with one hand and tossed it aside. Lena noticed that he wore a pair of field boots, contrasting with his officer's uniform. *He planned this from the start...?*

"May you taste defeat, Lena. I pray that your childish dreams crumble in the face of reality."

"Wha—?!"

She reached out to her "uncle's" back...but clenched her fist as she pursed her lips. She then clicked her boots together and saluted his back.

"May fortune be on your side, Commodore Karlstahl."

Whispering those words to herself, Lena set out again through the darkened corridors of the military headquarters, the commodore's final words echoing in her heart. The letters she read time and time again carving themselves into her mind, beckoning her to come to their final destination like starlight shining through the blackness.

Yes, Shin.

I will walk down the same path you did and find your final resting place, no matter the cost.



In a chance moment of pause between the clashes of the rampaging Legion, Shin's consciousness was pulled away from the battlefield. He thought he could hear someone's voice. He was in the midst of a large Legion offensive,

walking the razor's edge between life and death. But as he focused back on the battle in front of him, he'd all but forgotten about that voice.

He never once stopped to consider that it might be the last time he would hear "her" voice.

CHAPTER 6 **OVER THERE**

There was a *nyooz* report on TV about the situation in the *westin* front and how the *Federasee millytawy* pushed back a lot of Legion that attacked it.

Six-year-old Nina Rantz raised her head at the sound of a car pulling over in front of her house. It was one of the Federacy government's official vehicles, emblazoned with the red-and-black national symbol of the two-headed eagle. It was the steel-blue sedan that always brought her letters from her brother, Eugene.

Her aunt greeted them, and they handed her an envelope that was also emblazoned with the two-headed eagle. Nina ran over, believing it was from Eugene. He had left for the special officer academy six months ago and had seldom visited home since. She hadn't seen him at all in a month and a half.

Her kind, beloved brother, older than her by ten years.

Nina came closer and tried to call out to her aunt but froze when she noticed something weird about how she was acting. Her aunt's fingers were shaking. The soldier handing her the envelope wore a slanted black sash over his steel-blue uniform and pursed his lips.

What's wrong?

Did something...happen to Eugene?

At that moment, the TV's news coverage, which showed footage from the western front, suddenly filled with a blinding flash and a deafening roar.

†

As he stirred, shards of broken glass rattled as they slid from his body. Shin rose, lying over Frederica and shielding her from the blast. The windowpanes had all shattered, their glass scattering about. Specks of dust that rained down from above because of the tremor danced and fluttered in the sunlight that flooded the corridor leading up to the Division Headquarters' office.

Blood trickled down his left temple; he had apparently been cut by a shard of glass. Shin wiped it away roughly with the back of his hand. His ears still hurt from the shock wave that had passed over him after he'd dived to the floor.

When he saw the sight through the broken, unhinged windowpanes, his eyes narrowed.

Frederica unsteadily rose to her feet.

"...It's over. Shinei, what of the damage...?"

"Don't look."

Not giving her time to respond, Shin took her head, which came up only to his stomach, and embraced her with one arm, burying her face to block off her vision. Outside the window, he had a view of roughly ten kilometers of the base. And he could just barely make out what was left of FOB 14; the stronghold and headquarters of a single regiment that housed five thousand troops had been *completely annihilated*.

It hadn't merely been broken or ruined. The destruction was absolute.

The blurry silhouette of the massive gray structure in the distance was completely gone. Only the clouds of dust fluttering through that vast, open space implied that something once existed there.

Averting his gaze, he found that the headquarters they were in hadn't escaped unscathed, either. A stray shell had blasted into one of the nearby hangars, leaving only a large crater where it once had been. It was long-range bombardment by unguided shells with wide circular-error probability —its range of accuracy wasn't particularly high. All that remained were a crushed barracks, the ruins of a destroyed Vánagandr, and the scattered shell fragments that fell over everything like rain, leaving the place more ravaged than anything Shin had ever seen before.

Its occupants were likely...all dead. FOB 14, which had also been bombarded, was probably in a similar state. He could hear the faint voice of someone crying for help, no doubt pinned below an armored vehicle that was overturned by the shock wave blast.

Frederica's body stiffened upon hearing that voice. Forcibly twisting her neck to the side, she looked out the window with one eye, which widened when she saw the ruin.

"Th-this is..."

"Frederica."

"Kiri...did this...?"

"Frederica. Go back to your room and don't look outside."

Frederica suddenly looked up at him, her eyes wavering as she appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"You're..."

"...What?"

"You're not going to become like that, are you? Like Kiri..."

"Of course not. I don't want to become a Legion."

He had no regrets that would make him want to linger in this world after death.

The commander's office door swung open noisily.

"First Lieutenant Nouzen, are you okay?!"

"Yeah."

He was slightly bloodied, but a scratch was nothing given the situation. Biting her lip, Grethe motioned toward the office's interior.

"Could you tell where that bombardment came from? We have to pinpoint its location if we're to counterattack."

"Roger that... But—"

As he let go of Frederica and gently nudged her in the direction of her room, Shin shook his head.

"Do we even have a way of taking it out after we pinpoint its location...? It probably fired from several hundred kilometers away."

†

Shortly after the Federacy was established, it had to delegate the majority of its national strength to fighting the Legion, which meant it never got around to properly establishing legislation. This forced it to rely on ad-hoc judgment as a stopgap measure. But thanks to that, the people and departments involved in the action of formulating new laws were quick on their feet. And that held doubly true for the president, who maintained major authority over military and national policy.

"...Henceforth, the Long-Range Artillery type will be designated the Morpho."

The Federal Republic of Giad's presidential residence, aka the Eagle's Nest—Adler Holst. During the Age of the Empire, it had served as the throne of the emperor and the seat of command for the dictators when they took power. The assembly hall of this grand palace, built in the solemn, overbearing architecture of the late Imperial Age, now served as the National Defense Council's meeting room.

The assembly hall's seats were arranged in concentric circles, with Ernst occupying the central seat of the front row and looking up at the three-dimensional model of the western front projected into the air above them.

"The first barrage was of fifty-five shells that impacted FOB 14, in the 8th Army Corps' sector. Seventy-two minutes after that, FOB 13 was hit by a barrage of forty-five shells. Fifteen hours following that, FOBS 15 and 30, which belong to the 5th Infantry Corps, were bombarded with fifty shells each."

Luminescence stretched across the 3-D model, extending in parabolas from four points in the Legion's territory before clashing with the bases. Four sub-screens popped up at the top of the 3-D model, projecting footage of each base's current state following the bombardments, illustrating how the bases that were supposed to be there were now gone without a trace. All that remained to suggest anything had once inhabited the area were several massive craters.

"Each FOB was annihilated by the attack. And the twenty thousand soldiers stationed in these bases were killed in the process."

In less than a single day, four advance bases...twenty thousand combatants and base personnel...gone. Even as the analyst flatly delivered his report, traces of concealed emotion bled out from his tone.

"Our current hypothesis, based on the performance of the weapon employed against us, is that it was fired from an 800 mm caliber weapon,

with a maximum range of four hundred kilometers and an initial velocity of eight thousand meters per second... We have concluded that the enemy is in possession of an electromagnetic railgun."

Ernst's eyes narrowed. A railgun—a projectile weapon that used electromagnetic conduction to fire a round projectile between two rails. It consumed large amounts of electricity to do so and was a weapon that was extremely difficult to make in smaller sizes. It was also capable of firing projectiles at an extraordinarily fast speed compared to normal artillery's limit of two thousand meters per second.

The result granted the projectiles immense destructive power—the warhead's weight multiplied by its velocity. Impact may dampen its power slightly, but it was still a round traveling at eight thousand meters per second—its weight would easily reach several tons. Even a fortified base would crumble like a sandcastle when pitted against that much force, to say nothing of a prefabricated advance base.

"The Eighty-Six mentioned it in the report they gave us when we took them under our protection, I believe."

"Indeed...though we failed to develop a countermeasure for it in time."

The majority of the researchers working in the Imperial integrated military laboratories—which had served as the cradle of the Legion's birth—had surrendered to the old regime, and their bases had been taken over by the Legion, along with their personnel. Their knowledge—or possibly their brain structures—had likely been assimilated by the Legion at the time. And now that the Republic lacked the minds that had crafted the Empire's superior weaponry, they didn't have the technological means of creating weapons on par with what the enemy boasted.

"The fifteen-hour gap between the second and third volleys presumably stems from severe strain on the barrel. We took that time to prepare every cruiser missile the western front forces have and fired them all shortly after the fourth volley in a saturation attack. As we had no way of observing the impact, we have no way of giving an accurate estimate, but we believe that considerable damage has been dealt to the Morpho."

The Eintagsfliege's jamming and electronic interference made it impossible to fire guided weapons into the contested zones. It may have been possible to fire a guided missile a mere dozen kilometers away with the intent of bombarding an entire battlefield, but pinpointing a target that was as large as a building from hundreds of kilometers away was impossible.

So if they were to ensure a hit, they would have to compensate for it with numbers, which made them waste what precious little cruise missiles they had all in one go. They were mostly useless in anti-Legion warfare anyway, and the astronomical cost of producing them and launching GPS satellites meant that these were endeavors the Federacy didn't bother to take on too often.

"The fact that the Morpho has ceased all bombardment and movement since then seems to back our assumptions. But based on the testimony of the Esper observing it, we failed to completely take it out."

Said Esper was Shin. Ernst had only recently learned of his ability but couldn't blame him for not having said anything. The Eighty-Six's motherland robbed them of their human rights and made them into living weapons. They knew better than anyone that given the right pretext, human society could overlook any cruel atrocity. They likely didn't want to be taken hostage or killed—or worse—in the name of the Federacy gaining a convenient, accurate warning system.

...In practice, had Shin's power come to light under any other circumstances, their suspicions would likely have been proven right. As terrible as it was to admit, the range of Shin's ability was abnormally large. He and the Eighty-Six would never have been allowed to return to the battlefield. Instead, they would have been sent to a laboratory in some secure base near the capital and kept like birds in a cage.

Ernst bit his lip, looking down at Shin's portrait photo, which was appended with a paper clip to his personnel file and report. Shin had hidden his power, well aware of that risk. And despite that, the situation had been so dire he'd informed them of the attack on the western front, even though it could have, and indeed had, exposed him.

That he was such a terrible excuse for a guardian that Shin never consulted him despite facing such a crisis filled Ernst's heart with anger and shame. It was hard to say if Shin was truly afraid, given his five years of experience fighting the Legion. But having to observe that massive army marching in on them, unable to say anything, was likely unbearable.

A single silhouette—a low-res hologram that barely allowed all in attendance to make out the person's features—stirred leisurely at the front row of the assembly hall.

"With regards to the damage estimate, the self-propelled unit that we, the United Kingdom, launched has successfully observed the Morpho at the time of impact. It wasn't a direct hit, but you did deliver a crippling blow."

The United Kingdom of Roa Gracia's crown prince, Zafar Idinarohk. He was Roa Gracia's representative, his image transmitted to them by way of a line that just barely remained active thanks to the Legion's—and the Eintagsfliege's—retreat. Surprisingly, it was the crown prince himself, not his younger brother, who commanded the southern front where the United Kingdom fought against the Legion.

The crown prince's authority was second only to the king's, and he served as supreme commander of the military. It went to show that the Morpho posed a great threat to the United Kingdom as well.

A thin, elderly woman—or rather, her hologram—sat up and parted her lips to speak. She was a female officer of the Alliance of Wald and commanded its northern defense force. Her name was Lieutenant General Bel Aegis.

Ever since the Alliance's founding, it had upheld a policy of universal conscription, and so men and women alike were conscripted. Their nature as staunch advocates of armed neutrality hadn't changed at all.

"If you've gotten so close to it, couldn't your country's machines have disposed of the Morpho?"

The crown prince smiled gracefully.

"I'm sad to admit it lacks the payload required of such a feat. As I'm sure you've surmised, they owe their ability to sneak into the Legion's territories—even on relatively even terrain—to their small stature. Yes... You could say that as far as armaments are concerned, its carrying capacity is equal to that of a young maiden. And we had to sacrifice quite a few units to allow it to penetrate that deeply into enemy territory, which was rather taxing on my younger brother's nerves. I must ask that you do not demand the impossible of him."

That was probably why the younger brother didn't make an appearance. Judging from the prince's statement, it was likely a small recon or observation drone remote controlled from afar. And since the younger prince was the one controlling it, one could assume that certain restrictions limited exactly who could control it.

Lieutenant General Aegis scoffed.

"My, this is quite the...*magnanimous* display."

They did not simply sacrifice a large number of units in the name of reconnaissance. They also revealed some of their military prowess.

"Hiding secrets from my partners in an upcoming joint operation wouldn't do, now would it? Trust is the greatest adhesive that exists between fellow humans and fellow nations alike."

He was most likely lying.

He lauded his country's achievements, emphasized their sacrifices, and exhibited the power they could offer. Making demands and keeping the other side in check—this was something of a gamble he made to ensure the United Kingdom's terms in the upcoming joint operation would be even slightly more favorable.

Sitting on opposite ends of the front row that was arranged in a semicircle, the representatives of the two countries stared each other down in a stalemate. Ernst, who sat between the two, smiled. They had been segregated from each other for over a decade, but this was diplomacy at its core. This was how countries maintained their relationships.

Lieutenant General Aegis wore a cold smile.

"Well put, Your Majesty... Now then, would you be so kind as to share with us the Legion's tactical algorithm? After all, it was your country that developed the Mariana Model, upon which the Legion's artificial intelligence was based."

The prince responded with a smile of his own.

"Of course I don't mind, Lieutenant General... Assuming you would be willing to disclose information regarding the Legion units' physical makeup. Wasn't your alliance the first to adopt the technology that allows for multilegged mobile weapons to move faster than tank-tread models?"

An awkward silence fell between the two representatives. Ernst sighed and opened his mouth to speak. Despite the nature of their diplomacy, they didn't have time for this. And continuing down that topic wasn't in the

Federacy's favor, either. Out of the three countries present, it was their predecessor, the Empire, that had unleashed the Legion on the continent.

"I believe it would be wiser to focus on disposing of the Morpho right now...and getting rid of the unit with human-level intelligence."

"The Alliance has also confirmed the existence of a sentient, intelligent, commander-type Legion unit... Whenever it takes command, the fighting on the front line becomes much fiercer."

"The Legion's weakness was that despite their numerical and performance advantage, their tactics were simple. The introduction of the commanding units—ones that have overcome this weakness—has been a thorn in our side."

Lieutenant General Aegis sank into her seat, looking up.

"...That large-scale offensive may well have been a feint to call our forces out in the open and get them all in one place. It's infuriating how crafty those hunks of scrap can be."

"I should hope that the Republic—who effectively breeds those commanding units not only by neglecting to collect their dead from the battlefield, but even by sending their most superior soldiers deep into Legion territory—deeply reflects on the error of its ways... Assuming it still exists."

The crown prince shook his head lightly. As the Federacy learned about the Morpho's trial firings through taking the Eighty-Six under their protection, they inevitably shared the circumstances of their rescuing—and the reason they were driven out—with the other two countries.

"Well, they are a nation of fools that clung to the empty rhetoric of being a democratic republic of equal rights for all, even as they generalized every other race but their own as Colorata. Distinction leads to discrimination, and discrimination leads to persecution. That they did this doesn't come as a surprise to me... Though I do feel sympathy for our slaughtered brethren and even the Eighty-Six who are not of our heritage but faced persecution nonetheless."

With a sigh, the prince turned his gaze to the analyst, who stood silent as he spoke. He then wove his hand in a practiced, elegant movement.

"My apologies for interrupting your report. Do continue."

"Thank you."

While the analyst held a certain level of respect for the prince of another country, he was under no obligation to take orders from him. He turned his attention to Ernst, who gave a small nod, which the analyst took as a sign to continue.

"Let's continue, then. Judging from its movement speed and firing positions, we presume the Morpho is a railway gun that uses the old high-speed railway tracks to move. Its current position is near the old national border, in the railway terminal of Kreutzbeck City. It can use that position to fire at any base in the Federacy's western front, as well as have the United Kingdom's secondary capital city, Heete Birch; the Alliance's secondary capital, Estohorn; and the Republic's secondary capital, Charité, in firing range. It is also speculated that it can move along the rails spread out across the Legion's territories and the contested zones."

The three-dimensional model of the war zone transformed into a two-dimensional bird's-eye-view display that was reduced in scale and magnified. The high-speed-railway tracks were highlighted on the grid map,

and the Morpho's four-hundred-kilometer range was overlaid on it. All the army and government officials in the meeting hall—the two sly representatives included—swallowed nervously at the sight of it.

"The Federacy's capital city, Sankt Jeder; the United Kingdom's capital of Arcs Styrie; the Alliance's capital of Capella; and the administrative ward of San Magnolia will all enter its firing range."

These were the acting capitals of what were possibly the last remaining spheres of human influence after the Legion swept over the continent. In terms of defense, there was little difference between a nation and a snake. They both died once their heads were crushed.

"Judging from the Weisel's presumed rate of production, we have at least eight weeks until the Morpho is repaired and ready to fire again. If we do not come up with a way to deal with it before then...we will all be defeated."

Ernst spoke softly.

"Do we have a reliable way of taking it out?"

The analyst frowned.

"The western front's commanders requested a second opinion, but the analysis room's conclusion was..."

"...we have no way of effectively dealing with this high-speed, long-distance bombardment."

The western front's army-integrated Command had requisitioned an old castle, which had been a noble's villa ten years ago, to serve as its headquarters. As such, the conference room was a closed, windowless, dark room with stone walls. A phosphorescent holo-screen was projected over the round table at the center of the room. It illuminated the faces of the corps commanders of the western front forces, all compliant reserve forces, and their deputies. The shadows cast off the aides standing at the back floated over the walls like ghosts.

"Antiaircraft guns lack the speed and density to shoot the shells down. Besides, even if a 40 mm autocannon could accurately hit them, it wouldn't do much good against warheads that weigh several tons."

After surrounding himself with holo-displays, the chief of staff continued his explanation without paying them any mind. He was young and had the graceful appearance typical of someone of Imperial descent. He was this castle's previous owner and the son of a high-ranking noble who still held significant influence in heavy industry. Despite his pedigree, he wasn't the kind of useless man who achieved his rank through inheritance alone.

Being the child of a noble house in the old Empire, he received special education in his family's field of study: combat leadership. His level of understanding and experience in the field made most other specialists seem unskilled. The weapons crafted by the empire—like the Legion—were so technologically advanced that it was said they were one hundred years ahead of their time. Such feats were possible only because they produced talented individuals like this man.

"We're gathering cruiser missiles from the other fronts, but those aren't a guaranteed solution, either. We can't guide them, and their low speed makes them easy pickings for the Stachelschwein. The Morpho itself has powerful antiair armaments, as well."

The holo-screen went dark for a moment, and a black-and-white low-res video began to play. It appeared to be footage taken by the United Kingdom's drone, provided to the Federacy by Roa Gracia's military.

It showed a background of city ruins and a cloudy sky. The footage was taken from a low vantage point, roughly the height of a person. Something flared up at the edge of the screen, and immediately after that was a sequence of aerial explosions. The few cruiser missiles that managed to approach their target were shot down, and one missile that actually made it through the barrage activated its seeker, rushing at a massive object beyond the ruins. The missile detonated at short range even as it was shot down by antiair fire, which was where the footage abruptly stopped.

"These are the most likely results for any method we attempt... However, artillery fire lacks the range to hit it, and with the Eintagsfliege and Stachelschwein deployed, we won't be able to take air superiority. Staging an air strike would be impossible."

Aside from the Stachelschwein, the Legion's antiair defense was also handled by the Eintagsfliege that were deployed out in the skies. In addition to their main role of electronic jamming, they would attack aircrafts by swarming in their path and jamming their intake vents. The mechanical butterflies were the natural enemy of fighter jets and, in a sense, the most vicious of all Legion.

"Though, first of all—"

One commodore, who had transferred from the air forces, chimed in.

"—there may be some transport pilots in the rear, but all the fighter and bomber pilots changed professions to Vánagandr Operators... And most died in battle over the last ten years. There are hardly any survivors fit to pilot even if we did go on an air strike."

"So in the end..."

The corps commanders' gazes fixed on the western front's commander, who gave a solemn nod.

"Our only choice is to eliminate it in a direct confrontation with our ground forces."

A heavy silence filled the conference room. Sinking into his chair, the reserve corps commander groaned.

"A charge operation into the Legion's territories, using all of the western front's forces... A breakthrough in a straight line across one hundred kilometers of Legion-infested land..."

This plan of attack was so incredibly reckless that even Federacy military officers, seasoned veterans who had been fighting the enemy for ten years, who had bested them in terms of quality and quantity, could see it as nothing but madness. The survival rate of the soldiers and officers who

would participate in the operation would be exceedingly low, but should they fail, the western front (if not the Federacy altogether) would fall. Even if the theoretical success rate was close to zero, they had no choice but to try.

“...The western front’s forces have been reduced by twenty-four percent following the last large-scale offensive, reinforcements and reserves included. And we obviously can’t shift any forces from the other fronts, so we have to carry out this operation.”

“The Legion’s numbers were hit equally as hard, however...”

“Their parameters are completely different from ours, and so is their reproduction ability. According to recon, they have five corps’ worth of troops deployed on just the western front. It goes without saying that the Weisel, in the depths of their territories, are unharmed, and in two months, their forces would likely be even larger than that... Heh, having an Esper that can only prophesize your doom is certainly convenient.”

The vice commander of the 5th Infantry Corps snorted as he flicked a single thin sheet of paper containing an appended report. It was in the form of a personnel file but didn’t have a photograph attached, and everyone present understood why. Pausing for a moment, the vice commander concluded mournfully:

“Whichever unit we send to handle the Morpho’s elimination...is a unit we will essentially be sacrificing.”

“Yes... And that’s why we have to pick the people who would do the most thorough job.”

“The ones who would not be missed.”

“The ones we would least regret losing.”

“Tch...”

The information analysis section chief, who sat across from him, didn’t fail to notice him click his tongue.

“Is something wrong, First Lieutenant Nouzen?”

He was the very image of a stern officer. It didn’t sound like an anxious or suspicious question but rather like he was concerned for him. Yet, Shin wasn’t able to immediately come up with an answer. The officer’s voice felt distant and faint to him... And by contrast, the cries of the mechanical ghosts stirred in his ears without stopping, alerting him to their positions...

“First Lieutenant.”

At that second call, Shin came to his senses. He was in an information analysis room in the 177th Armored Division’s home base. He’d been in the midst of searching for the enemy’s position for a few days now, as he’d been requested to “collaborate” with the Division while the operation was being drafted.

Waving away the holographic electronic document that had been set to be illegible unless it was viewed from a certain perspective, the field officer inclined his head like a hunting dog.

"Maybe you need to take a little rest. You've been doing this nonstop since morning. You may be hearing the voices of the Legion constantly, but concentrating on them for so long is another story."

"No."

Shin shook his head as if to say he was fine. The field officer sighed as he rose to his feet.

"...Right. You guys... You really are just like disposable weapons."

There was no disdain or mocking in his voice. It was nothing more than an observation. Turning his large back to Shin's gaze, he walked over to a cabinet on the other side of the room, retrieving what appeared to be his personal tea set, and picked up the tea cozy meant to preserve the tea's warmth from escaping the teapot.

The Federacy's citizens were surprisingly fond of tea. But since tea leaves were mostly available in the continent's east, all they had was the synthetic tea the production plants put out, which had a distinct medicinal aroma. The scent slowly filled the room.

"Weapons in human form. Expendable... Replaceable, though only in the event you break completely. You grew accustomed to pretending you never noticed how worn out you had become. If you broke, you ignored the fact that you could feel pain, so you simply continued to fight until you could no longer move. Even as you were exhausted, terrified, filled with hatred, you faced the Legion."

He returned with two teacups in hand and placed one before Shin, taking a sip from his own while standing.

"You're pale. This isn't the 'battlefield without casualties' that you're familiar with. Here, we understand that every person who fights for our sake is a human being with his or her own life, so you can go ahead and set your standards for what counts as pain and fatigue a little lower. Pain and fatigue are alarm bells. The fact that they've grown dull for you is deeply concerning... While you rest, you can leave tracking the enemy to them."

His eyes turned to the office divided by a glass partition, where red-haired, red-eyed Pyropes of various ages and genders, officers clad in steel-blue uniforms, went about their work. Some noble bloodlines inherited unique abilities, and Pyropes—who were the noble bloodline of the Rubela—tended to develop abilities relating to telepathy. Such abilities were highly sought after, as Pyropes were recruited to serve as reconnaissance or interrogation personnel.

"You would do well to remember this: In a humane world, there isn't a single person alive who can be replaced by another... For better or worse."

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The countless soldiers injured in the large-scale offensive were sent away to be treated, to ease the burden on the front lines. But the air in the military

hospital in the capital, far from the front lines, was still thick with choking despair.

Unable to bear the oppressive silence in the sickroom, Erwin Marcel employed the crutches he had finally grown accustomed to using to leave the room, while making sure to not touch his broken right leg.

He didn't have any acquaintances in the hospital. Most of the comrades from his company had been killed in the large-scale offensive—and so had his contemporaries from the special officer academy. Some were still fighting on the western front, while others were gone. Just like his classmate from secondary school, who'd entered the special officer academy the same time as he had and even joined the same corps... Eugene, who'd passed away just recently.

News of the new type of Legion, its capabilities, and the estimate of the damage it caused were reported to the citizens via the news. One could see Sankt Jeder's streets from the hospital premises, and they were completely silent. Like animals taking shelter on the eve of an approaching storm, everyone fled to their hiding places and held a collective breath. They all cautiously waited for the moment the situation would change, surrounded by this strained silence.

Freedom of information was fundamental to modern democracy, and there was no hiding what happened anyway; the destruction of FOB 14, the first to be bombarded, was effectively broadcast live as it happened. Foolishly trying to cover it up would only make people rise up in revolt because of misinformation, and so the government probably judged it would be simpler to always report accurate information.

Their decision seemed to have borne fruit; while there were minor outbreaks of panic and sporadic chaos, for the most part, the Federacy's citizens kept their composure. Should the western front retreat or fall, the capital would enter the Morpho's range. So there were a few people who ran, but the majority of civilians went on with their daily lives.

But that was because they knew, deep down, that despite defending half its past territory from the Legion, the Federacy was surrounded on all sides. There was nowhere to run.

“...Mm.”

Since this hospital was a military installation, civilians weren't allowed to enter it unless there was some kind of unusual disaster or emergency. But Marcel could spot a small figure standing near the gate, which was empty save for the sentries. Examining it, Marcel walked forward, noticing it was a girl he knew. He'd met her when he'd gone over to his classmate's house once; it was his little sister.

Eugene's little sister.

“What are you up to, munchkin?”

She jumped with a start and turned to face him. He recalled Eugene's smile as he'd told him about her timidity. Eugene himself had been very sociable, so he'd jokingly wondered where she'd gotten that nature from.

...That was also why he'd approached that Reaper from a foreign land.

The girl's large silver eyes widened as she looked up at Marcel, blinking in surprise as she realized she recognized him. She wasn't allowed in, so he exited the gate, and she approached with small steps.

"I'm looking for Eugene...but they won't let me in."

Marcel sneaked a fleeting glance at the guards. They were a few years older than he was, standing at attention with assault rifles strapped over their shoulders. They simply averted their eyes in visible discomfort. It wasn't out of any ill will, but even though she was just a little girl, rules were rules.

Putting that matter aside, Marcel pursed his lips. He knelt down, despite his broken leg, and faced her at eye level.

"...They said Eugene came back."

Federacy soldiers never left their comrades behind, bringing them back even if all they could retrieve were their remains. They always collected them and returned them to their families. Eugene was picked up after that battle, and his coffin was sent back on a supply train, alongside other casualties, shortly before the large-scale offensive broke out.

But that was a silent, different kind of homecoming than the one this girl wished for. Nina shook her small head, her two neatly done braids gently swinging side to side like a cluster of fireflies.

"But he's not back. They didn't bring Eugene back... All they brought back was a box."

"Ngh..."

Marcel bit his lips. If a dead soldier's remains were in a state unsuitable to be seen by civilian eyes, they would be buried with the coffin nailed shut. That was likely the case with Eugene. The higher-ups had probably decided to spare his family the sight of his corpse after he'd lost half his body and taken a bullet to the face.

But little Nina was still too young to comprehend death... So no matter how one attempted to word it, she wouldn't be able understand how a casket with the national insignia on it could possibly be Eugene.

Marcel's teeth dug into his lower lip. He recalled the battlefield in the western front's deep forest. That scene enveloped in otherworldly, viridian mist. A child soldier...a handsome, ominous reaper clad in a bloodstained flight suit, rising casually to his feet after using the pistol he held in one hand to take the life of his comrade.

Putting the dying out of their misery was a mercy on the battlefield. And thanks to the fact that his brain was destroyed by the act, the Tausendfüßler wouldn't collect his body during their terrible headhunts that turned people into Legion.

Even so...

His actions made it so Nina never got to say good-bye to her brother. He'd technically returned home, but she was unable to associate the event

with his death. Had he even considered this possibility before he pulled the trigger?

Did you, Nouzen?

You Eighty-Six... You're even capable of shooting a friend to death without batting an eye... Just like a reaper...

"...Eugene... Brother..."

Marcel averted his gaze, unable to meet those large, innocent silver eyes, incapable of answering the question they contained. *Where are you?* He felt her eyes accuse and condemn him, even though Nina likely didn't think to do so at all.

Why? they asked. Why didn't you save my brother?

It wasn't me back then.

It was him.

He didn't save him.

He didn't protect him.

He was at his side, and he didn't...

They were friends, but he still chose the cold, unfeeling Reginleif over him.

He abandoned Eugene.

Accuse him, not me.

He was the one who killed Eugene.

And it was then that Marcel finally understood.

He looked down on the citizens of the Republic of San Magnolia, seeing the discrimination and persecution they forced onto the Eighty-Six as inhumane barbarism, but now he understood the reason.

When people are faced with the unreasonable and the unfair, they have to shift the blame away from their own helplessness...

...and make it someone else's fault.

"Eugene was..."

As the words spilled from his mouth, Marcel was unaware of the rigid, malevolent smile that played over his lips.

†

"Guess it makes sense everyone would be scared stiff when the Legion could blow the whole base to bits from the other side of their territories at any moment."

Kurena spoke with a half-hearted tone that didn't fit her words as she wolfed down her scrambled eggs, eyeing her surroundings with all the indifference of a housecat. They were in the 177th Armored Division's cafeteria. Even though new reserve troops were brought in, and there were more people dining here than usual, the normally tumultuous sounds of mealtime were dampened by the suspenseful atmosphere.

Sipping her coffee substitute from a paper cup, Anju remarked, "That new Legion unit—the Morpho, right? They said it'll take two months for it to be up and running again, so we likely won't be attacked until then."

"Yeah, but they're basing that estimate off footage they got from a foreign country they haven't been in contact with for ten years—a video that cuts off from electronic jamming five seconds in, at that—and an Eighty-Six's extrasensory perception: an ability the Federacy can't even explain. It's no wonder everyone doubts it. Back in the Republic, the other Processors didn't believe Shin until they heard it themselves," Theo said, stuffing one of the Federacy's famous sausages into his mouth.

Anju sighed, admitting that what he'd said made sense. It was surprising, if anything, that the high brass of an organization as realistic as the military accepted the existence of Shin's special ability so easily.

"Still, they went public with the situation, and there wasn't even any panic over it. The Federacy's military has some impressive skill."

"Agreed. If it was the white pigs of the Republic, I bet the Handlers would shit themselves and try to bail as quickly as possible."

Theo smirked at first, but his smile suddenly died down.

"...If something did happen to them, I wonder if the major's still alive."

"Theo."

Theo held his tongue as if he'd just been rebuked. Shin cocked an eyebrow, feeling everyone's gazes on him.

"What?"

"Huh? Whaddya mean, 'what'? Don't tell me you aren't aware by now."

Shin still looked puzzled, and Raiden sighed in exasperation.

"...This whole thing with the Morpho, the situation getting critical like this, is kind of making the people of the Federacy aware of the fact that they might die tomorrow without being able to do anything about it."

The battlefield was always like that to begin with, but not everyone was fully aware of this. This kind of environment was the most unusual of all for a living being that prioritized its own survival. But Kurena puffed her chest and proudly declared, "That much is obvious for us."

Life on a battlefield where tomorrow wasn't guaranteed. The Eighty-Six's fate was to die at the end of their service, after all.

But Shin couldn't help but think. Not fearing death even as it stares you in the face... Accepting the fact that you could die tomorrow... It may have been necessary to adapt to those things for the sake of surviving in the Republic's battlefield... But somehow, he felt that it wasn't something to take pride in. Perhaps not fearing his own looming death—believing it was fine if death came tomorrow—was actually...

Noticing Frederica was peeking in on him from the side, Shin snapped out of his thoughts.

"Shinei? Is something bothering you?"

That dubious question made Shin realize he had probably been silent for a long while.

"It's nothing."

Theo poked Shin's cheek lightly with the fork in his hand.

"What, you still tired? There was a ton of Legion present in that attack earlier, so it must've been really loud for you... You were tunneling pretty hard at the end there."

"I'd bet you didn't even notice what was going on around you. I think this is the first time you couldn't recognize that the Legion were retreating."

"..."

Now that Anju had pointed it out, Shin could see the truth in her statement.

"I tried to contact you through the Para-RAID, but you wouldn't respond... That's not how you usually fight, is it?"

"...You Resonated with me?"

"...You didn't even notice..."

Sighing in a somber manner, unlike that of a child, Frederica glanced over at the others, her black, silken hair flowing down her shoulders.

"Shouldn't you all, Shinei included, take this respite as a chance to rest and recuperate? War in the Republic and war in the Federacy are two very different things. Don't you feel fatigued at all?"

While they didn't have any support or command in the Republic, they also weren't constrained by the military as an organization in the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Drones had no rules to abide by, and Shin's ability to keep track of the Legion's movements allowed them to have free time, which they used however they wished. However, that wasn't possible in the Federacy, which, after ten years of fighting the Legion, maintained the structure of an active military. But in spite of that...

"At a time like this? Not feeling tired is kind of a tall order."

"Maintaining the mental health of its soldiers is one of the army's duties. Truth be told, many soldiers around your age, from the special officer academy, were sent back to the rear after the large-scale offensive. They'd been diagnosed with neurosis. And you are Eighty-Six, after all. If you ask, I'm certain they will take it into consideration."

Kurena grimaced grumpily.

"What? No. I don't want that. Screw getting treated like we're special out of pity." The cafeteria was noisy, but a high-pitched voice traveled easily. Gazes fixed on them inadvertently, and in the next moment, the atmosphere in the cafeteria turned harsher, as if a cold wave passed through the room.

...Eighty-Six. They could hear someone spit the words out. The monsters the Republic gave birth to. Those monsters were better off fighting their fellow monsters in the territories. But instead, all they did was summon more monstrosities to their doorstep.

The malice in the air made Frederica swallow nervously. Shin and the others, on the other hand, didn't seem even slightly bothered. Why would

any of this phase them, at this point? They were driven to the battlefield under the claim that the Eighty-Six had acted against the Republic and led to its defeat at the hands of the Legion. And Shin, who had the blood of the Empire's nobility flowing through his veins, along with his special ability, was often shunned even by his fellow Eighty-Six as a despicable reaper who bred war and summoned death.

The world always turns its back on the minority, on the heretics, on those who stray even slightly from the norm.

"Kurena," said Raiden.

"I know... But having them look at us like this is still better than pity. At least we're used to it."

"..."

"If someone tries to fight us, all we have to do is not lose. But pity's different. You can say you won't lose, but people'll treat you like you already have... And I hate that."

Breakfast time was short in the military, and everyone's eyes gradually drifted away from them. But the cold atmosphere lingered, and Frederica glanced around uneasily.

Raiden scoffed.

"...But all they managed to do was buy us two more months, huh? I don't see them coming up with anything in that small amount of time."

"Assuming they think of anything, period. Apparently, they want the operation to start two weeks early... I doubt any solution they'd come up with would do any good, though."

"The Federacy can be pretty heavy-handed. Not that I blame them. The Legion have them trumped when it comes to performance, numbers, and information, and there's no bluffing or shaking their will, either."

The Legion had no morale to lower or ambition to take advantage of. They didn't even hold their own lives in high regard. They lacked any weaknesses that would prevent them from walking all over a human army. Any clever scheme one would attempt to use against them was a gamble more than anything. Trying to plan against the Legion was simply unthinkable. These autonomous drones were graced with strategic excellence and would trample any half-hearted plot made against them with sheer numbers.

The only true way to face them was through honest strength—a frontal assault.

"They don't have enough missiles, their artillery can't reach, and the air force is out of the picture... Which leaves..."

"A ground assault. Don't know if they'll try to sneak behind enemy lines or smash their way through, though."

Just then, a steel-blue silhouette appeared in the cafeteria's entrance.

"—Attention!"

That deep, booming voice rippled throughout the cafeteria. Army discipline had firmly registered the voice in every soldier's mind, and all

present stood at perfect attention. All except for the young mascots, who cowered in fear of the thundering bellow and were late to stand up. Even the Eighty-Six, who were a bit lacking when it came to discipline, were no exception.

An officer with the rank insignia of a colonel observed the Federacy military's spotless organization with green, wolflike eyes and nodded.

"The operation's been decided. All officers serving as company commander or above are to gather in the briefing room at 0900 hours."

It was still seven thirty in Federacy standard time. Heading to his room in the residential sector by himself, Shin once again sank into his thoughts. The words Theo had spoken earlier were still on his mind.

If something did happen to them, I wonder if the major's still alive.

There was nothing to wonder about. He was the only one who knew the truth, and there was no need to tell anyone, so he decided not to share the fact that...

...the Republic had already fallen.

He had learned the truth when he helped the Federacy detect the Legion's movements in their territories. He could hear the Republic's chaos washed over by the mechanical voices from far beyond the territories, away from the Federacy. From what he'd heard, shortly after the large-scale offensive, the Federacy detected unusual seismic tremors. Those were probably caused by the Gran Mur's fall.

He'd expected the Legion to use the Morpho in tandem with their offensive, but the reason they fired it at them only after the fact was likely because they'd already conquered the Republic by then.

It had been a week since the large-scale offensive happened and the Gran Mur fell. That country—which forced the Eighty-Six onto the battlefield and then enclosed itself in a shell of empty dreams only to forget how to defend itself—couldn't even last a few days. It was a country he couldn't consider his homeland, and all the memories he carried of it were little more than fuzzy images from his childhood. Even if the Republic was crushed or wiped out, Shin felt no emotional attachment.

But...

Maybe someone will come to help before the Republic falls.

So until then...you have to stay alive, Major.

They didn't make it in time. Shin sighed, gazing at the shards of glass still littering the corridor.

Major. Could you please...never forget us?

If we die. Even for just a short while, could you...?

But it seemed Shin ended up being the one to remember. He couldn't help but think that he was always the one left behind. By his comrades who died in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield. Everyone he spoke to. Everyone he was ever involved with. Sooner or later, he and everyone he ever got close to would be parted by death.

The Reaper who buried their names, their memories, in aluminum grave markers. He'd never once thought that way of life was a bitter one, but...

Don't leave me behind...

She was the one who'd said that... So why?

Why did even she leave him behind?

"...Hm?"

Shin paused, noticing an envelope inserted in the gap under his room door. He grimaced as he thought, *Not again...* He sighed, recalling the letters sent by "well-intentioned" civilians, using them as pretext to send the "poor Eighty-Six" luxury items out of pity. It was when he was about to tear it up and throw it away without checking that he realized.

The envelope was still sealed.

The Federacy military always opened and checked any letters sent to soldiers, for the sake of security. But the envelope didn't seem to have been opened. To begin with, all those letters and packages were sent to the military headquarters in the capital, and the supply line didn't have the leisure to send anything like this over in the western front's current state.

Checking the envelope again, Shin saw that it didn't have the receiver's name or address, nor did it have a postmark stamped onto it. It wasn't delivered to him through the postal service.

"..."

Narrowing his eyes, Shin flipped the envelope over and, against his expectations, found the sender's name. It was jotted onto the letter with pencil in the thin, hard-to-read handwriting of a child...

Nina Rantz.

Rantz.

Furrowing his brows, Shin took a utility knife from his pocket and opened the envelope. The single, thin, almost transparent sheet of paper felt like it belonged to the kind of cheap stationery one would expect a child to have. There didn't seem to be anything else hidden in the envelope. He opened the folded piece of stationery with one hand, and there were only two lines written on it.

why did you kill my brother?

give him back

And then.

Shin felt a cold, thin smile play over his lips.



He didn't know who had delivered the letter— No, considering it was someone who knew both Shin and Eugene and knew what had happened to Eugene, the options were fairly limited. He must have had a lot of free time on his hands. He hadn't seen him since the large-scale offensive, but he was still alive, considering he'd delivered the letter. There were still some of their contemporaries from the special officer academy in the western front's army, so it wasn't too hard to have the letter delivered to Shin, still sealed, without going through the postal system.

He really did have a lot of free time.

Or maybe it was exactly because this was the kind of situation they were in. He used the weight of the justice carried in that young girl's condemnation as a shield. And from behind that shield, he would attack him and call him a murderer.

"...Figures."

Why?

Why did you kill my brother?

Why did you abandon him?

Why didn't you save him?

Everyone kept asking him those questions, over and over again, from the day he stepped onto the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield until now. Time and time again, they kept on asking him.

You can hear the voices of the Legion. You're so strong. You always survive like that. So why? He died, so why didn't you...? Why are you always the only one to...?

He'd gotten too used to this; he'd grown sick and tired of the blame. And their accusations were completely off the mark, at that. In the end, the only one who can take responsibility for one's life is oneself. Shin wasn't coldhearted enough to claim the weak had no one but themselves to blame for their deaths, but having people hold him responsible for not protecting those who couldn't protect themselves felt absurd.

But there was one difference this time.

I was waiting for him.

That voice of condemnation was the voice of that little girl he'd met only once, and for some reason, it also felt like Eugene's voice.

I was waiting for him to return.

And you knew I was waiting.

So why?

Why didn't someone like you, who has no one waiting for them...

Why didn't someone like you, who has nowhere to return to...

...die in his place?

"...Good question."

There was no one to hear him in the deserted corridor as he muttered in agreement to himself. And in contrast to his inner thoughts, the cheap stationery crinkled as he crushed it in his hands.

Raiden climbed up the stairs of the prefabricated barracks and stopped when he found Shin, standing still in front of his room.

"Huh, so you came back here, Shin...? What's wrong?"

When he saw Shin's bloodred eyes turn to him, a shiver ran through Raiden's body. It was just like that night in the first ward, when four of their friends were blown away by the Long-Range Artillery type. On that night when he realized he was on the verge of the unavoidable confrontation with his brother's ghost, Shin now had that same dangerous look in his eyes.

"...Nothing."

There was something very eerie about his tone, but Shin probably didn't realize it.

"There was a change of plans. We're still gathering at 0900 hours, but the meeting place is the division commander's office. And it's only for the Nordlicht squadron's captain and the 1,028th Trial Unit's commanding officer... Only you and the lieutenant colonel," said Raiden, stifling his fear.

Shin's red eyes narrowed at the implication.

It was immediately obvious that whatever orders they wanted to convey wouldn't be good ones from the moment they summoned only the unit's commanding officer and the squadron's captain to the office for the briefing. But what they'd heard was so absurd that Grethe's ruby lips quivered with rage.

"The operation's primary objective is infiltrating the old high-speed-railway terminal located one hundred and twenty kilometers northwest of the 177th Armored Division's sector and eliminating the Morpho occupying it."

The scale of the map of the battlefield displayed on the holo-screen was one used by the corps and was significantly larger than the forty-kilometer map the division used. It included the entirety of the western front as well as the defensive lines of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia and the Alliance of Wald. It wasn't the kind of map that would usually be seen by a mere squadron, even if it did boast the highest loss-exchange ratio in the military and had stood head and shoulders above the rest during the recent large-scale offensive.

"Our secondary objective is the recovery of the old western border zone, aka the Highway Corridor."

The aforementioned zone was illuminated on the map. It had the scope of a belt tracing the old western national border, located several dozen kilometers away from the western front. As its name implied, the Highway Corridor was built over a highway that connected the three countries, and the zone included the majority of the old high-speed-railway tracks. They employed this strategy as a measure to ensure the Legion wouldn't be able to deploy the railway gun equipped with the Long-Range Artillery type again—to seal that deadly weapon away for good.

There was the chance they could set rails somewhere else, but be it a highway or a railway line, it would in most cases be a place that was already

accessible. Should they insist on building it over unfavorable terrain that had been passed on before, it would increase the burden on the Legion's engineer units.

"The forces participating in the operation will be the entire western front's forces, all complying reserve forces, the United Kingdom's southern front forces and royal guard corps, and the Alliance's northern district defense forces and central response corps... Both countries currently have their secondary capitals in the Morpho's range. It seems they're not in a position to hide behind their shields any longer."

The United Kingdom and the Federacy were separated by natural defenses. The Dragon Corpse mountain range between the United Kingdom, and the Alliance was a collection of small nations based on a steep mountain district that had the holy mountain, Mount Wyrmnest, in its center.

Both used their natural defenses to face off against the Legion and establish their national defensive lines. But those were useless against the Long-Range Artillery type's bombardment, which soared straight past them.

"The operation's outline is rather simple. The combined armies of our three countries will advance into the Legion's territory to deceive them into thinking they're the main force meant to eliminate the Morpho. They'll attract the attention of each sector's main force and detain them. Using this distraction, we will airdrop a small strike force into the depths of the Legion's territories, which will proceed to eliminate the Morpho."

It went beyond being simple; it was reckless. Shin's ability to track the Legion's movements made it clear just how great their numbers were. There were several hundred thousand in the western front alone, a number that equaled five corps. And the Legion didn't have any noncombatant units except for their supply and communication units, which meant the Legion's large numbers translated to pure military might.

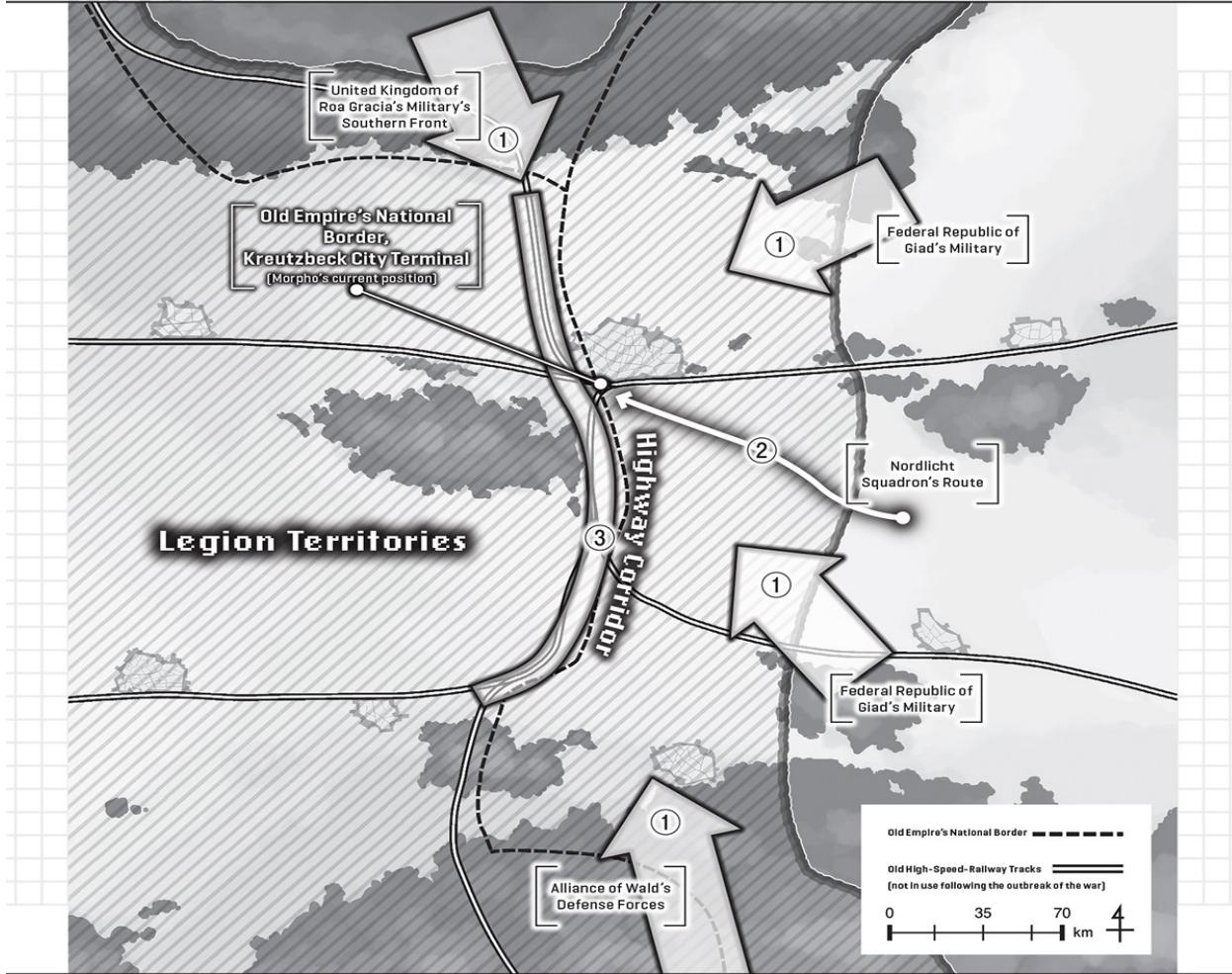
If the countries were to clash with them directly under such numerical inferiority, it would no doubt cost them dearly, and in all likelihood, the strike force wouldn't survive. The major general was well aware of this but continued his explanation calmly. His single black eye contrasted with the purple eyes looking down at him.

"After the Morpho is annihilated, the strike force is to defend the terminal until the main force arrives and then link up with them and return to base. We've decided the strike force..."

He tore his single eye's gaze from Grethe and instead fixed it on Shin, who stood behind her.

MAP

Assault Operation Overview



This operation is a joint endeavor between three countries: the Federal Republic of Giad, the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, and the Alliance of Wald. Now—when the Morpho is idle—is our last remaining chance at victory.

- Primary objective: elimination of the Morpho hiding in Kreutzbeck City's high-speed-railway terminal, in the old Empire territories.
- Secondary objective: reclaim the Highway Corridor in the old Empire territories, which connects the three countries via land.

Phase one of the operation: Each country's army will march into the Legion's territory in full force, attracting the attention of the bulk of each sector's forces, and keep them pinned down (point 1).

Phase two of the operation: With the rear of the Legion's forces becoming unoccupied, a special strike force will attack and proceed to eliminate the Morpho. The force will be led by First Lieutenant Shinei Nouzen and fifteen members of the Nordlicht squadron (point 2).

Phase three of the operation: Following point 2, once the Morpho's destruction is confirmed, the front lines will push forward to take advantage of the enemy's rear forces' state of chaos and secure the Highway Corridor. Concurrently, they will also regroup with the Nordlicht squadron. That is all. We expect nothing but the finest efforts from all parties.

* * *

"...will be helmed by First Lieutenant Shinei Nouzen, along with fifteen units of the Nordlicht squadron."

Shin's expression remained unchanged. The major general looked at those red eyes that refused to meet his gaze and said:

"You will be the spearhead that breaks through the Legion's defenses in the greatest joint operation in the history of humankind. Never forget that, and strive to fulfill your mission to the best of your ability."

When he considered what this strike force *was established to do*, the metaphor using his former squadron's name rang like a very hollow joke in his ears. Or perhaps it was said on purpose... In which case, the irony was far too cruel.

"May I ask a question, Major General?" Grethe asked in a raspy tone, visibly restraining her anger.

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel Wenzel?"

"Why...? Why pick my Nordlicht squadron?"

The major general scoffed, as if it were a foolish question.

"Our criteria for the strike force were rather strict. Vánagandrs are too slow, and they're also too heavy to carry by airplane. Armored infantry lack the firepower to pull it off. Heavy artillery isn't flexible enough to be used here. We needed a unit with enough mobility and firepower that was also light enough to carry via aircraft. In addition, they'd have to be experienced with fighting under conditions where they're cut off from communication with HQ and be skilled at fighting under numerical inferiority. Not to mention they'd have to be capable of tracking the Morpho's position. The only ones who fill all these criteria, Lieutenant Colonel, are your Reginleifs and First Lieutenant Nouzen."

Grethe bit her red lip.

"Have you no shame...?! You're sending the Eighty-Six... You're sending *children* to their deaths just because they don't have families?! Because no one would complain if they were gone?! Like they're dispensable pawns?!"

"Watch your tone, Lieutenant Colonel."

"No, I will not. This is little more than a suicide squad! You're thinking of using the first lieutenant to draw the attention of the Morpho and the rest of the Legion and advance the main force, because that would increase the chances of shooting it down with missiles. At worst, they'd at least help exhaust its antiair defenses. That was your idea, wasn't it?!"

The missiles may have had a wide circular error probability, but the closer their firing position was to the target, the more accurate they became. If they were to push into the Legion's territories and fire a saturation attack of similar density to the last one, there was a better chance of a direct hit.

"We are indeed preparing for a saturation attack, but only as insurance in case things go south. We're not telling them not to return. We are not the Republic."

"But you're doing the same thing! What is the likelihood of the Nordlicht squadron's safe return from this operation...?!"

When it came to low-altitude flight meant to avoid radar detection and antiaircraft fire, a transport helicopter would be more reliable, if slower and capable of carrying less weight. And while the Reginleif was relatively light, it still weighed over ten tons. The most a helicopter could carry was one—if they were to carry fifteen, they'd need to deploy a formation, and the roar of the rotors would surely be picked up by the Ameise's highly efficient optical and audio sensors.

And as was the case for most aerial weapons, transport helicopters weren't heavily armored. Most would be shot down. And if their force of fifteen units was to challenge the Morpho with their numbers diminished, the end result would be obvious.

And this operation—this suicide mission—was based around all those assumptions.

The major general gave an irritated sigh.

"Any continued protest will be seen as insubordination, unless you have any other proposals."

Grethe suddenly fell silent. The major general shrugged.

"Someone has to do it. And in that regard..."

The major general once again turned his gaze to Shin. His bloodred eyes were still narrowed, without so much as a hint, not even a ripple, of hesitation in them. Even as his life and the lives of his comrades were on the chopping block.

Did he— Did the Eighty-Six understand that this was a sort of insanity?

"You already have experience infiltrating Legion territory. You've done it once. Surely you'll be able to do it a second time. And regardless of that, you Eighty-Six seem rather infatuated with combat."

How could one describe the emotion that filled the major general's eye at that moment? It was deep pity and reckless fear, all at the same time. Like the irritation a person felt when a puppy they'd picked up had unexpectedly bitten their hand—or the guilt someone would feel when throwing their infant to the wolves in order to escape.

And one-sided pity and fear were both tantamount to misunderstanding. Be it pity and loathing or fear tinged with awe, the emotions stemmed from not viewing the other as an equal, out of forfeiting any intention to ever understand them. And when the other acted differently than was expected of them, they received nothing but ire. It glossed over the guilt. Using the other's foreign status—their otherness—as an excuse to treat them however they wanted was all too common.

They were *different*, after all. They weren't like us.

"The Federacy saved you from the battlefield. We gave you a place to live and a home to return to. And if, in spite of that, you still chose to return to the battlefield, surely you're prepared for this as well. Battle is a warrior's duty. A soldier's duty. And dying in battle is a part of that duty."

Shin left the office with Grethe, who slammed the door behind her in a show of irritation. And as she did, the adjacent office's door opened. The western front's chief of staff walked in. Even amid the dire conditions of the front lines, his suit was perfectly pressed and carried the scent of cologne. He was accompanied by a capable aide who briefed him on the severity of the situation, and he likely saw fit not to let his reaction show. But in truth, it must have been hard to sleep with the countless updates and new bits of information coming in around the clock.

"My apologies, Major General. I forced an ugly task upon you."

"I don't mind. This is part of my job as division commander."

It was a commander's duty to order their subordinates—be they fathers, siblings, or children... Be they young men and women with futures ahead of them. It was a commander's duty to order them to die. Or rather, to fight against the enemy even at the cost of their very lives. Even so, it wasn't often that he had to give such an order. The major general sighed as his thoughts swam.

"...Do you think they'll return?"

Would even one make it back?

This man, with the black hair and black eyes of a pureblood Onyx, was yet another one of his younger associates from the military staff college, the same age as Grethe. Despite that, one went on to become the chief of staff for an entire sector, while the other became a trial unit's commander and a field officer. That was because he was the heir of a powerful noble family that was heavily involved in the Empire's politics at the time, while she was the daughter of a mere merchant—albeit the owner of a large company.

And while their backgrounds put a considerable distance between them, there was also a difference in their values and dispositions. One had the coldhearted, calculating nature of a commander, willing and unafraid to see their subordinates served up as pawns to be sacrificed in order to complete an objective. Grethe lacked that trait: the one so readily possessed by the old nobles who had grown used to seeing the common folk not as people, but as property.

"According to the general staff headquarters, the Nordlicht squadron's odds of returning alive are roughly zero percent, which is to say it isn't exactly zero... But that's just sophistry."

Numerically speaking, a one appearing after a long sequence of zeros following a decimal point was enough to say that number wasn't zero. And yet, one wouldn't say "They have a chance of surviving" with those odds. Knowing this perfectly well, the chief of staff gave a thin smile.

"Most soldiers would fly into a rage if you ordered them to send their comrades on that kind of mission, but I guess the Republic's berserkers

accept it without an argument. They'd say that's a mission worthy of the Eighty-Six, with satisfied grins on their faces."

Many soldiers saw how the Eighty-Six fought the Legion in the large-scale offensive, which caused many groundless rumors to spread among the other soldiers on the western front. The fearless warriors who face an army worthy of the name Legion without flinching. Fighting with an almost intoxicated bloodlust even at the cost of their own lives, despite having nothing to protect. To those who stifled the fear of losing their own lives because they had families and loved ones to protect, this was insanity.

"Whoever fights a monster should see to it that they do not become a monster in the process, eh...? True enough. Those who rival monsters have already become monsters in their own right. Doubly so when it's a blasted child born from mixing the blood of the two greatest monsters the Imperial army has ever known—the "Crimson Witch" Maika and the "Ebony General" Nouzen. Siccing him on those mechanical demons is only fitting."

Shutting the heavy oak door behind her, Grethe sighed.

"...Are you disillusioned, First Lieutenant? In the end, this is what your final destination—what the world—is like."

Because it's necessary. Because you have no families. Because you're foreigners. Their final destination, the world, was a place that could cite these reasons as justification for sending children to their deaths.

"...I think it's an appropriate decision, given the situation. If you don't do everything in your power to destroy the Morpho, the Federacy won't be able to hold the line any longer. And besides..."

Looking at the office door with disinterest, Shin shrugged.

"...the fact that they're not turning tail and running away even when their frontline base is in the enemy's sights is good enough for me. I have no complaints."

"Right... The Republic wouldn't even do that..."

A dry chuckle escaped Grethe's lips. The Republic was just insane in the sense that even its soldiers, sworn protectors of their people, refused to face the enemy. And even though they managed to escape that insane world, they were still shackled by its inhumane values.

Grethe turned around, her smile gone.

"What they needed was the Reginleif's mobility and your power. But that said, there's no need for you yourself to go."

As a rule of thumb, the only absolute in the army was completing the objective. How that was accomplished was left up to the discretion of the person entrusted with the mission. Coercing soldiers to be selective about their methods in a place as volatile and filled with uncertainty as the battlefield would do nothing but hinder them.

"I'll only assign the Vargus to the strike force... The rest of you can stay behind."

Grethe, who was looking away, didn't notice how Shin clenched his fists at that moment.

"And once this is over, resign from the military. You've fought more than enough to defend your homeland, so now you can—"

"So..."

His interjection taking her by surprise, Grethe turned to look at Shin, her breath caught in her throat.

"...you're telling us to stop being who we are, just so you can satisfy your sense of justice and take pity on us?"

The boy standing in front of her wore an expression she hadn't seen cross his face in the six months since he'd been taken in by the Federacy, even during the large-scale offensive... An expression befitting a boy his age. The obstinate eyes of a child who had the one precious thing he carried with him mercilessly crushed right before his eyes.

"We're grateful that you saved us, but there's no reason for you to pity us. No reason we should be told not to fight... Because fighting..."

...is all we have...!

Despite the fact that he swallowed those words... No, precisely because he did, his tone sounded as if he'd spat out those words along with his very lifeblood.

Why do you fight?

Why do you keep on fighting even when you have no reason to?

There was no question more insulting to the Eighty-Six. Pride was all they had. They were robbed of everything save the pride they took in fighting for their lives until the very end.

Any family they could have protected was long dead, and they had no place they could truly call home. History and tradition died with their relatives, and the culture they should have inherited was forgotten in their infancy, just like the pages of the picture books read to them every night.

Their so-called homeland stripped away their dignity and expected nothing more from them than their sacrifice. They had no reason to go on, and yet, they clung to life. They shaped their lives around their shared sense of pride. In that battlefield of certain death, locked between mechanical ghosts on one end and their persecutors on the other, their pride—their drive to fight on—was the one thing keeping them from falling into despair.

Even if one were to ask them why they fight, they would never answer. Why? Because they didn't have an answer. They had nothing to fight for. Nothing to defend. They fought on because they found dignity in it. It was a source of pride they refused to relinquish. Even if it meant dying in the process.

"If we ran away from the battlefield and left the fighting to someone else and simply sat back waiting for death to claim us, we'd be no different than the Republic. It'd be the same as pretending to be alive when you're already dead. We'd never, ever reduce ourselves to that."

As Shin hissed these words in a manner so different from the children's usual calm, it was clear just how strong their rejection was. Grethe bit down

on her lip even harder. She realized what she had just lost. In trying to deprive them of the one thing they took pride in, she had shattered what little trust they had in her and the Federacy.

They were the Eighty-Six. Children who were cast out into the battlefield, lived in the shadow of war, and fought through a world of pain and despair, with no home to return to, and with pride as their only weapon.

The Federacy told them that they didn't have to fight anymore, that they could leave the battlefield behind and live peacefully. But those words the Federacy carelessly spoke time and time again threatened to rob the citizens of their identities.

Shin averted his bloodred gaze. His eyes would not meet hers again.

"Giving orders from the rear would result in a potentially fatal time lag... I will lead the strike force directly."

†

Once all units were briefed on the assault operation, the room was blanketed by an oppressively grim tension. The objective was nothing short of reckless, and the road to its completion would be paved with the lives of each unit's soldiers. But if they failed in destroying this tactical weapon with a firing range of four hundred kilometers, three countries, including the Federacy—no, perhaps humankind itself—would be wiped out.

The entirety of the western front's forces would charge one hundred kilometers straight into Legion territory. And the ones chosen to stand in the vanguard—were the Eighty-Six. The operation map was projected coldly onto the holo-screens of every unit's briefing room.

The briefing for the 1,028th Trial Unit—the Nordlicht squadron—was just as stressful. They were a strike force meant to infiltrate deep into enemy territory. The probability for their safe return would be the lowest out of all the western front's forces.

Having finished her rudimentary explanation of the situation, Grethe left the briefing room with the other required personnel following behind. The maintenance and research teams left after them, still discussing the operation. Lastly, the Vargus squad members stood up with stiff expressions.

Bernholdt, the squadron's most senior sergeant, turned to face the five Eighty-Six who stayed behind in the briefing room before leaving.

"Captain."

This young sergeant, who served as Shin's aide at all times, had, at this moment, looked at him not as he would at a superior but rather as a worried elder at a reckless child.

"I won't say we aren't grateful that you're not abandoning us, but... We won't hold it against ya if you go back on your decision. You can order us to deploy without you, you know."

"..."

His statement went unanswered, and Bernholdt left the briefing room without another word. Heaving a long sigh, Raiden slid back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

“...Not like they even have the privilege to say that with an operation as half-assed as this.”

“They’re using the entire army to lure out the Legion so we can somehow reach a target one hundred kilometers away and destroy the Morpho.”

“And our way back is dependent on regrouping with the main force. Who knows if they’ll even make it?”

“That’s assuming we survive. We’ll be in the heart of enemy territory with no covering fire. It’s like the Republic all over again.”

But even as they exchanged gripes, there were faint smiles on their lips. It was the kind of farsighted, philosophical view that made them realize that was just the way it was sometimes.

And in truth, what other choice did they have? Their objective lay far behind enemy lines with no viable alternative methods of completion. And if they didn’t eliminate the enemy, their death was assured. The Federacy had to do this if they were to survive, even if it meant losing the majority of their soldiers.

These conditions were identical to the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. No battle was easy, and no victory was certain. The only difference was that now they were fighting because they chose to fight. They were able to go down this path of their own will. Being Eighty-Six, they knew that freedom was hard to come by, and so they would never willingly forfeit it.

Even though he knew that, Shin spoke up.

“For what it’s worth, the lieutenant colonel said we can forfeit the operation if we want.”

“Are you kidding me? If we bailed now, we’d be the same as the white pigs.”

Theo smiled even as he spat the words out.

“Hell, you snapped at the lieutenant colonel yourself, didn’t you? We all feel the same way.”

Throughout the briefing, Grethe hadn’t made eye contact with Shin once. So they were able to draw the conclusion that something must have happened between Shin and Grethe, who loathed the idea of sacrificing children, before the briefing began.

“But you know, they gave us the most dangerous role just because we’re Eighty-Six. And that does...make me feel a little lonely.”

The Federacy wasn’t a bad country by any means. If nothing else, it was a much nicer place than the Republic ever was. But being deemed the country’s most expendable pawns made them feel ostracized, to say the least.

What are you fighting for? What do you have to defend?

That question was asked under the assumption that people needed a reason to fight, and the Eighty-Six, who stood on the battlefield with no such reason to their name, were abnormal in the eyes of the Federacy.

They had no homes to return to or families to defend, and if their final destination wasn't a place where they could be true to themselves, the battlefield was all they had left. If no one wished for them to be there, either, they had no reason to be kept around like pets out of pity.

Monsters.

Yes, that was probably true. They would live on the battlefield, fight until their luck ran out, and die there. It wasn't the kind of life any person should have had to live. And yet...

Shin clenched his fists.

Pride is all we have.



“—It is for these reasons that we've chosen the Nordlicht squadron, including the five Eighty-Six, as the strike force to take down the Morpho.”

The Federacy's capital, Sankt Jeder, was built at a high altitude, and its sunset came late during the summer months. The afterglow of the setting sun bathed the president's office in shades of scarlet. Ernst's eyes were fixed on a wall that had a holo-screen projecting the image of the western front's army's commander in chief, who glanced back at him, looking stern.

“This is a legitimate order passed down under my authority as the western front's army's commander in chief. They may be your adopted children, Your Excellency, but once they've enlisted in the army, we cannot give them any special treatment. I'm afraid to say that even you won't be able to overturn this decision.”

“I am aware. I was prepared for this from the moment they wished to enlist, and I gave them the go-ahead... It would be unacceptable for me to send my country's soldiers to their deaths but spare my children the same fate.”

Perhaps Ernst's detached tone made the commander—a lieutenant general—feel pangs of guilt. He coughed dryly before continuing.

“I do believe that as a campaign to raise morale, it's hard to find a better story than this. Children we rescued from adversity at the hands of an enemy nation choosing to risk their lives in an operation that hangs the fate of the Federacy in the balance. And to have them *volunteer* to lead the charge in the riskiest unit... It's a heart-wrenching tale, the kind the citizens would love. Depending on how we publicize it, it could have a very positive effect on our enlistment numbers, not to mention your approval rating.”

“Cut the political drivel, Lieutenant General. It doesn't suit you.”

Ernst scoffed, looking at the lieutenant general's rugged, rectangular face—the very image of a seasoned warrior. He then asked, his tone the same as before:

“Lieutenant General, are you sure this operation isn't a continuation of the *disinfection* you attempted a year ago?”

A heavy silence fell between them for a moment.

"When we first took them into our custody, you, along with several other officers, held that opinion—that mere children escaping the Legion's territories was far too suspicious. You didn't believe they actually slipped through their territories. You thought they were *infected* with something and that we should dispose of them for the good of the Federacy's people."

Five child soldiers of tender age had been saved from the headhunt. Even the division that had saved them, and the corps commander in charge of them, couldn't help but look at them with pity. The drone recovered with them, the piloting of which seemed akin to suicide; the way they would shy away from strangers; the countless battle scars on their bodies. These various elements together painted a clear picture of the persecution by their homeland and supported their testimonies.

But every one of those elements could also be fabricated, if one had a mind to do so. There was no way of confirming that they weren't spies sent by the Republic on some sort of secret mission. The fact that the Legion were forbidden—by programming—from employing biological weapons, and that the children went through the regulated inspections and isolation period, was not proof they weren't infected by a bio-weapon or that they weren't the bio-weapons themselves.

There was no proof whatsoever that they were *clean*.

Had they been Federacy citizens, the army would have accepted the risks. But they were *foreigners*. The Federacy had no obligation to defend them. And there were firm requests from some of the officers that they should be disposed of if need be. But Ernst's insistence that the Federacy, which placed justice as its national policy, would never reduce itself to that made them step down.

"I won't condemn the requests and say they were heartless and cruel. Discrimination can stem from good intentions just as it can from ill will. It's because people wish to defend what they hold dear that they can do away with what they don't consider precious, and I don't intend to deny that."

However mistaken an act that leads down the path to inhumane cruelty may be, wishing to defend those you hold dear is an honest manifestation of the human spirit.

"But those who claim to be human and never use or rely on words, instead using violence to achieve their means, are wrong in every sense of the word. This isn't you agreeing with me superficially and using this crisis as pretense to secretly overthrow my decision...correct?"

"...Of course not."

Then why did he pause before he replied?

"But do consider this. In practice, they aren't pitiful children, but despicable, combat-crazed berserkers. Do you truly think these monsters would find a place in our Federacy? Is that really what we should aspire to?"

It was admonition steeped with bitterness, but Ernst simply smiled.

"Why of course, Lieutenant General."

If nothing else, this lieutenant general wasn't some lunatic intent on slaughtering children. And knowing this, Ernst replied without a hint of hesitation.

"Because that's my ideal—and the ideal of the country I lead. I do, after all..."

For ten years, the majority of the Federacy's citizens had continually elected him.

"...represent the opinions of the Federacy's citizens."

Proud, noble, and just.

Suddenly, the lieutenant general's breath caught in his throat. The vision of an ominous, fire-breathing dragon intersected with the appearance of his president, passionately speaking these ideals from the bottom of his heart.

†

It was the second time they had to tidy up their personal affairs before an operation with slim chances of returning alive, but just like last time, they didn't have that many personal articles to sift through. But there was one piece of *luggage* Shin needed to send back to the rear, and he was currently knocking on her door.

"Frederica."

"It's open."

Opening the light plywood door, he stepped into the cramped room, its furnishings all set to one side in a flat line like a corridor. Frederica was sitting on her small bed, her chin sunk into the head of her stuffed animal. She turned her face away from him in a sulk.

"The operation," she murmured over her shoulder.

Shin raised an eyebrow in response.

"You've consented to undertake it, have you not? That reckless, suicidal operation from which there can be no return."

"I thought I took off my RAID Device... You were *watching* us?"

The details of the operation were a military secret, and they were forbidden from carrying any communication devices—namely, the RAID Device—into briefing. Especially in the case of this operation, should any details leak out to the public, it would cause serious mayhem and upheaval. And if the Legion were to pick up on it and somehow decipher their intentions, the results would be catastrophic.

But for Frederica, who had the ability to view the past and present of those close to her, seeing the operation-map projection on the holo-screen and its movements was child's play. This allowed her to easily guess the objective of the operation.

"That saves me time explaining things, then... Go back to the capital as soon as you can. Once the operation begins, there might not be a transport line to take you back."

"...A Mascot is held captive by her soldiers. I could not return even if I wanted to."

The Mascots were nothing more than a burden on the battlefield, but they still weren't permitted to return. These girls were held hostage, to serve as daughters or little sisters for the soldiers as a means of preventing them from fleeing the warzone.

They came from varied backgrounds. Some were orphans without relatives. Others were sold off by their parents to reduce the numbers of mouths they had to feed. And there were those who were illegitimate children of noble families, given up in favor of legitimate heirs under the guise of national loyalty.

Now that the base was under constant threat of attack, the chances of soldiers deserting were higher than ever, so there was no way the Mascots could be relieved of their duty. And even if they were given permission, the Mascots would have nowhere to return to. The girls served their roles as Mascots until the age of twelve, and once they'd finished their service, they would go on to the training academies, aspiring to become military personnel. With no other place to call home, they would grow accustomed to the battlefield, eventually becoming unable to leave it for the rest of their lives.

And so before that happened to Frederica...

"*You* would be able to go back. Now's not the time to be picky about your methods."

"If I use that petty paper pusher's authority, I might be able to do so, yes... But why are you telling me to go back? Was it not you who said you did not wish for others to decide your way of life for you?"

"I also said you'd be better off not getting needlessly involved with other people's deaths."

His family going off to war and never returning. His consort units getting blown away on his Juggernaut's main screen. His comrades begging him to put them out of their misery. Those who committed suicide, unable to endure the voices of the dead echoing from the Resonance... He would have been better off if he hadn't had to witness these atrocities time and time again.

The majority of the soldiers involved in the coming operation would likely die. And that wasn't a hell Frederica, who could *see* the present of those she knew personally, needed to witness.

"This wouldn't normally be approved, but the odds are heavily stacked against us for this operation. We'd be lucky if we only got pushed back. At worst, we'll get counterattacked, and the front lines will crumble. And if that happens, this base won't be safe anymore."

Though, if that was to happen, the capital wouldn't be any safer, either, but Shin left that unsaid. If one was to think of it like that, it didn't matter where you ran. And he had no intention of letting the situation come to that.

"I can recognize its voice... When we were in the first ward, it blew away four of our friends. So I don't really need you to tell me where it is."

Kino and Chise, Touma and Kuroto. Four comrades who'd fought with them on their final battlefield in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and been bombarded from beyond the horizon.

"But it's the other way around! I am the one who shares a past with Kiriya, so why must you be the ones to go on a path of no return?!"

Frederica ran up to him, clinging to his body. Her abandoned stuffed animal fell from the bed, tumbling down to the floor. Shin had bought her this toy because she'd insisted, but he'd never understood what she liked about it. It was an odd, creepily made, hand-sewn teddy bear.

"I will speak to Grethe, so you lot ought to stay behind. Your ability to trace the movements of every Legion is priceless to the Federacy military. And you've finally escaped the Eighty-Sixth Sector, that battlefield of certain death. You mustn't give up your life for such a reckless operation!"

"You can only see your knight, but not the other Legion. You'll never manage to break through their territories. Even if you infiltrate it, you'll all die."

"...Why...? ...Why are you consistently trying to push us back to the rear...?!"

Her crimson eyes, so much like his own, widened with fear. But it wasn't because Eugene's death had awakened her to the reality of death on the battlefield. In the first place, Frederica had asked them to help her extinguish the ghost of her knight if they returned to her battlefield, but she never told them to fight in order to do so.

"Didn't you want us to gun down your knight? If you know the Federacy has to deal with the Morpho, even if that means losing every soldier they have, why are you trying to lower their chances...? I think the truth is that you don't want it to be destroyed."

"..."

In that moment, Frederica's eyes were, without a doubt, swimming with terror. Shin looked down at her and sighed. He was right.

"...That's all the more reason for you to leave. And forget about all this. You don't want to become like us, do you?"

Frederica pushed Shin away with all her might and screamed. But even though he was a boy, he was approaching the end of his adolescence, and he'd spent so long on the battlefield. Frederica, with her young, childish physique, lacked the weight to budge him. She staggered two, three steps back but maintained her balance.

"After you went into the battlefield with the goal of finishing off your brother's ghost—and succeeded—why would you tell me to not do the same with my knight?! Why am I forbidden from accomplishing my goal...?! Surely you've begun to realize... That pitiful ghost has no goal to strive toward or land to return to. Pride is the only thing that urges it forward. Do you wish to become the same as him?!"

Her slender fingertip pointed to the northwest. Shin, who could hear the cries of the dead, could tell she was pointing to where her knight was. But the sound of its voice wasn't enough to tell him what it was feeling right now.

"I'm not your knight."

She's the same as I was back then.

Is she?

When did he and Raiden have that conversion? Thinking back on it, he realized that he and Frederica were indeed different. He had to take his brother out, no matter what he had to sacrifice to do so. He had to move onward, to atone. And that wasn't a goal Shin would allow himself to give up on.

"Feel free to see him in me all you want... But don't foist your regrets and need for atonement onto me in the process. It's annoying."

"...! You obstinate fool!"

Frederica finally lost her temper and shouted. The girl's high-pitched voice echoed around the small room.

"I am telling you not to go, so obey me, you insufferable idiot!"

Clenching her fists, she stomped the ground in a childish tantrum. Her red eyes filled with tears as she glared at him.

"Surely you regret not having said these words to your brother, do you not?! You still regret saying nothing and watching him leave for the battlefield he would never return from, do you not?! Then why do you do the same thing your brother did?! Why must you force the same painful experience your brother put you through on me?!"

Having screamed from the depths of her small body, Frederica panted heavily. With each heave of her chest, tears streamed down her cheeks, as if all the anger she held back broke the dam and gushed forward.

"...Frederica."

"Don't go."

Her voice was fleeting, fragile.

"I do not wish to lose *another brother*. I do not want you to die as Kiri did."

"..."

"I wish to never again see a brother of mine driven to the battlefield by my hand, only to die. I do not wish for anyone else to die. So please... Don't go."



†

It was the dead of night and already lights-out for all bases in the western front. But the workday for field officers and commanding officers was far from over. The 177th Armored Division's commander's office was dark, but the major general continued his work under the light of the holo-screen projected onto his heavy desk. A modest knock on the door made him raise his head, and he furrowed his brow at the sight of his visitor.

"I'm not listening if you're intending to ask me to reconsider the operation."

"I know, which is why I'm here to offer my opinion."

Grethe approached the desk, her heels clicking against the floor, and she nodded as if pulling her chin back. Refusing orders was forbidden no matter what rank you were, but officers reserved the right to offer an alternative plan. Though, of course, whether that alternative would be accepted was up to the superior officer's discretion.

Standing in the dark of night, Grethe fixed her purple, almost luminescent eyes on the major general...and smiled.

"You scattered the Nordlicht squadron to platoon-size units to avoid this situation, didn't you, *Richard*?"

The Processors may have had godlike combat abilities, but a platoon-size unit was limited in how much it could achieve, so it could accumulate only so much fame and infamy. It was only natural, given the small scope of enemies they had to face, and their allies' numbers equaled their own, so word didn't spread regarding their exceptional combat prowess. It would, at most, become a ghost story to pass the time on the battlefield, as many such rumors often became.

But suddenly, those platoon-size units became a squadron and were placed in the center of such a delicate operation, to boot.

"...Juggernaut, was it? When I saw the records on that defective weapon's mission log, I couldn't help but do so. And the records of their first campaign, too, where an entire company was destroyed, but only First Lieutenant Nouzen survived. The only things you cared about were their results and the data for their high-mobility fighting style, though."

The Juggernaut's mission recorder stored all its data files from the moment of start-up in a condensed state, and the major general had already checked it. It contained an extraordinary number of combat logs and an equally impressive number of enemy casualties. According to the testimonies the Eighty-Six gave them when they were questioned upon being rescued, it was only one of three spare units Shin used in circulation whenever one was seriously damaged, so it wasn't deployed all that long...as hard to believe as that was.

The major general knew that sending him out to battle wouldn't result in anything good. Compared to the common Federacy soldier, Shin was like a far-too-sharp, overly whetted cursed sword. Recklessly making a display out of him would result in either his being loathed or his breaking from overuse. But as it turns out, he was actually a mad sword that spilled even more blood than ever anticipated.

"...Don't get too attached to him. He's certainly a pitiable child, but once he had been made into what he is, he was beyond saving. He had grown into someone who makes the battlefield his roost and lives between one skirmish and the next. It's seeped so deeply into him that there's no removing it by now. You can try to protect him as kindly as you wish... But war is all he knows."

"No."

The major general raised his one-eyed gaze at this stern denial. Her violet eyes glared at him in the darkness.

"He's not pitiful, and that's not for us to decide. The only thing we can do for these children is make sure they're given the time they need to make a decision."

They were so used to combat, so much more dependable than any other soldier, it was easy to forget. These child soldiers felt so much like veterans, with so much more experience than anyone else, that even Grethe had managed to forget.

But they were only children, barely past their midteens.

It hadn't even been a year since they came to the Federacy, and it would take anyone time to get used to a new environment. That was doubly true when the environment they came from was a radically different place where they could trust no one. They hadn't yet adapted enough to the Federacy to consider reaching out for something they had never known. In this rapidly changing environment, they struggled just to scrape together a semblance of a daily life, unable to consider anything more.

They might know how to *survive*, but they didn't know how to *live*, because they were still treating every day like it might be their last. So even if all they had was their pride, that was enough for the time being. They had no one to protect and nowhere to return to, so that would have to do.

But someday, once everything settled down, they might wish to regain what was stolen from them. And even if they chose to live on the battlefield despite everything they'd been through, that choice should be theirs to make—and no one else's. And one mustn't choose for them on the assumption they wouldn't make the choice themselves.

There was no telling how many years it might take. But someday...

"They may be citizens of the Federacy right now, but they originally came from another country. Do we really have any obligation to do this much for them?"

"Of course we do. It's our duty. That is, unless we intend to be arrogant enough to treat living, breathing humans like drowning puppies we've picked up from the side of the road."

Giving them food, a roof over their heads, and a kind owner—it may have been done with good intentions, but they treated them the same as pets and never took their dignity or individual wills into account. And in that regard, what they were doing to the Eighty-Six wasn't significantly different from what the Republic's citizens did.

Perhaps the overwhelming "benevolence" of it all served only to make their behavior that much more vicious. They saw the people standing in front of them not as fellow human beings, but as characters from a drama or a movie, consuming them as a means to experience a cheap sense of justice and piety.

"You really think a blood-soaked sword that's been forged in the flames of war and sharpened on the souls of the fallen will be able to understand human compassion?"

"Once upon a time, we made that same gamble, Richard. And back then, I won... Even if the Legion took everything from us soon after."

"..."

The major general sighed heavily.

"I'll say it again. Don't grow overly attached to that *thing*, Grethe. You're just seeing the image of someone else in him... Someone you've lost. Someone you'll never be able to get back."

"Yes, I am. But...what's so wrong with that?"

Showing no concern for how undignified it may be, she placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. She approached him with a faint smile.

"If everyone who knows what I lost is jumping to conclusions like that, that's all the more convenient for me. I'll say it as many times as it takes. I will not watch children die on the battlefield... And I'll do anything to stop it from happening."

With that said, Grethe's smile turned ghastly. Her red lips were cut from having been bitten too much lately, yet still they curled into a sweet smile in the darkness.

"Measly transport helicopters aren't worthy of carrying my cute Valkyries to their big performance. Give me permission to deploy her."

The major general placed his elbows on the table, the shadow of his clasped hands obscuring his mouth as he sighed.

"...*Her*, huh?"

"That's right."

Grethe gave a small nod. On the left breast of her uniform shone the winged emblem of a pilot, and she wouldn't remove it even if the very fabric was torn off.

"The Nachzehrer."

CHAPTER 7

SOMETHING TO DIE FOR

"Activating first and second Flywheels. No abnormal transformer substations detected."

"Commencing cooldown of catapult rails. Coolant device operating at twenty-three percent and rising—"

"Canopy disengaged. Deploying catapult rail."

Shin, resting in Undertaker's cockpit with his eyes closed as it remained on standby, raised his head at the sound of a heavy, rumbling roar reverberating from above. His three optical screens were currently synced with his *mothercraft*'s external cameras, granting him a slanted view from the nose of the plane. At the edge of his vision, he could see the camouflaged canopy of the underground catapult opening, exposing the surface.

The dark-indigo glow of dawn filled the cockpit, spilling in from the rectangular window to the sky. The sun still hadn't risen from below the horizon, its rays mingling with the darkness of night, granting the heavens a peculiar transparent shade of indigo blue. Autumn stars, the names of which Shin didn't know, silently faded away.

With its slide stretching out, the catapult's extension rails stabbed into the daybreak's sky as if to challenge the stars themselves, and a metallic screech tore through the night air as machinery locked into place.

"First to final joint locks—complete. Nachzehrer, ready to launch."

†

The first time *it* was shown to him was a month ago, a week after the strike operation into the Legion's territories was decided.

"Some people have called it the forbidden shutter."

Come to think of it, they never had seen this shutter at the back of the 1,028th Trial Unit's hangar in the division's HQ base open before. Beyond this bulky anti-bombardment shutter was a slant with a width of over one hundred meters.

Grethe spoke as she stood before the control panel of the elevator filling the space, looking down into the darkness below it. Even though fifteen Processors and all the maintenance crew, control personnel, and researchers were standing on it, they occupied less than half the open space on this abnormally large elevator.

"This hangar was originally used to store experimental weapons during the Empire's reign. Then the war broke out, and we had to abandon this

base for a time. But her rollout and test flights were already complete, and we left her shortly before we began mass production."

"I imagine it was placed in an underground facility to keep things confidential, but this base was close to the border at the time. How did you perform the test flights?"

"Unlike fighter and bomber planes, its performance wasn't something to keep a secret, and the greatest thing that was expected of this *little one* was the fact that she couldn't be seen. We needed a large, empty place to perform her test flights, and the only place that fit the bill was the western Vargus territories, the Wolfsland. In other words, here. Her hangar was underground to protect her from air strikes, and it was better to have all her related control and construction facilities underground, too. Thanks to that, the Tausendfüßler never managed to find her and pick her apart."

With the exception of the Ameise, the Legion's sensors and perception ability were inferior. They may detect a Feldreß or a fighter jet lying around, but an "experimental craft" hidden behind shutters meant to protect against bombardment escaped their attention for the decade they had control over these territories.

"Related facilities?"

"Basically, her runway... Or more precisely, the catapult attached to it. If she was to work the way the military intended, she would be too heavy to take off on her own and would require an electric catapult to go airborne."

The subtle vibrations of the elevator came to a stop. Grethe entered the darkness with familiar steps, the clicking of her military shoes echoing far and deep. It was a large, open space, in terms of width, depth, and height. Suddenly, every light bulb in the room switched on, and white LEDs blinded their corneas for a moment.

Grethe turned around, with her back to *that*. One of the Processors, or perhaps someone from the maintenance crew, swallowed nervously. None could recognize the full scope of the thing crouching before them. It was simply that large. Its full length was likely almost one hundred meters, dwarfing even the C-5 Hræsvelgr, the largest transport plane in the world and pride of the old Empire's air force. Its dull metallic fuselage had a planar composition typical of stealth crafts. It had the shape of a massive boomerang that somehow gave the impression of a dragon spreading its wings.

"I present to you the prototype Landkraft, the XC-1 Nachzehrer."

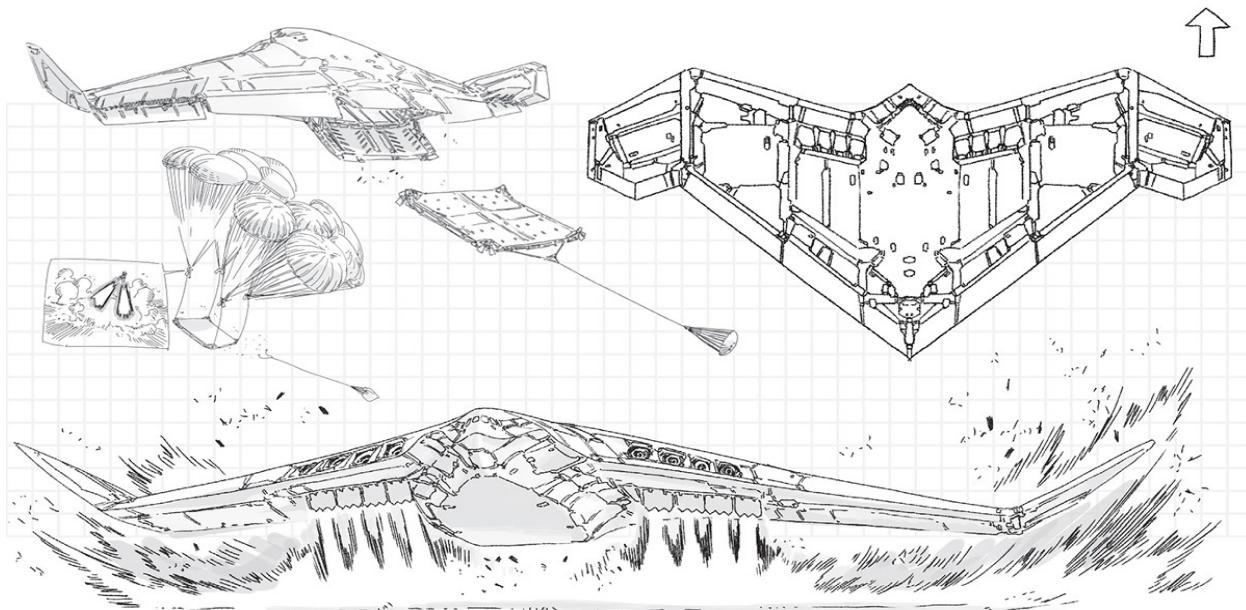
The unfamiliar model name seemed to have been based off a legend from the Federacy's southeast, of a vampire that rises from its grave, drags its shadow along cemeteries, and rings church bells. The name felt somewhat unfitting for a military aircraft soaring through the skies, but Grethe answered everyone's apprehensions with her follow-up statement.

"She's an unusual aircraft that employs the massive dynamic lift she gains near the surface to fly while barely grazing the ground. She has a cruising speed and payload equal to that of a normal airplane and flies

lower than a cruise missile, at an extremely low-altitude flight of only several meters above ground level. That makes her extremely unsusceptible to detection by cruise missiles and radars... She was originally created for large-scale, high-speed transport exclusively along the Wolfsland front. Her official payload is two hundred and fifty tons, but if you ignore margin, this baby is capable of packing three hundred. She was designed to carry squads of four Vánagandrs at a time."

FRIENDLY UNIT

Prototype Ground-Effect Winged Vehicle



XC-1 Nachzehrer

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: WHM

Weight capacity: 250 tons [nominal] /
roughly 300 tons [maximum]

[A R M A M E N T S]

None

A ground-effect winged vehicle, aka Landkraft, is a unique aircraft capable of flight several meters above the ground (similar in principle to how flying fish and seabirds are capable of long-distance, quick movements over the sea). This prototype was made for transporting supplies over the Empire's territories but never saw use due to the outbreak of war with the Legion.

As previously explained, its low-altitude, high-speed flight enables it to evade detection by antiair weapons and allows it to deliver large amounts of supplies. But this also means it can operate only over flat terrain with no obstacles. It is also difficult to manage and requires the use of a takeoff catapult for initial ascent.

Grethe then paused and grinned fiendishly.

"But if it's Reginleifs, she can carry fifteen at a time... This baby can carry you all the way to the Morpho faster and a little more safely than a transport helicopter."

Its cruising speed was high, and it flew at low altitudes, slipping through the radar web. It was also a much quieter alternative to the loud noise a formation of transport helicopters would produce. If nothing else, it would lower the risk of their journey to the target.

However...

Theo listened and spoke with his eyes half-closed.

"Can that thing actually fly that close to the ground? If it's just a few meters above ground level, it'll collide with a building or a house."

It presented a whole new set of risks.

"The area this operation takes place in might be Legion territory right now, but it used to be Empire territory. We've got maps of the area and its topographic data all lined up. If we were up against people, it would be one thing, but the Legion don't build houses or erect towns, so the terrain should have remained mostly the same."

If surface weapons like the Legion would become incapable of fighting just because of exposure to the elements, the war wouldn't have lasted this long.

"The Weisel and Admiral are as large as buildings, but they wouldn't be this close to the front line, and First Lieutenant Nouzen has a grasp on their positions. We can evade them if need be."

"...I might know where they are, but I can't tell what type of Legion they'll be for sure."

"That's all we need. We'll just fly through places where there are no Legion."

It might be hard to intercept its low-altitude flight infiltration, but if there were any Legion in its path, it would still be shot down. If it was only several meters above the ground, even a Löwe, which struggled with swerving its turret in angles of elevation, would be able to take aim at it from below.

"Besides, if it needs a catapult to take off, how are we supposed to use it to get back home? This thing won't be able to fly us back."

"As originally planned in the operation's first draft, the Nordlicht squadron will be recovered by the main force. It'll be the same in this regard. It's still better than having transport helicopters on standby to carry spare Reginleifs."

The old maintenance-squad leader cocked an eyebrow at her words.

"Missy, I'm almost afraid to ask, but...who's gonna be piloting this thing?"

Grethe splayed her arms out in a grandiose, if not comical, manner.

"Yours truly."

†

"I really don't think there's any need for you to come, Lieutenant Colonel."

Shin spoke dispassionately, but Grethe, who was sitting in the Nachzehrer's cockpit, only smiled with greater delight on the other end of the Resonance.

"Do you think anyone but me will be able to get this baby to budge? Most of the old Empire's pilots are dead by now, and no one has experience piloting the Nachzehrer during her test flights except for me... It's a good thing we still had a flight simulator left at the main office."

Several people groaned at her ominous soliloquy, but Grethe didn't seem to pay it any mind, and neither did Shin.

"Right, you used to be a pilot in the air force, Lieutenant Colonel."

"...When you put it like that, it sounds like you've only just remembered that, First Lieutenant."

Shin honestly wasn't interested in the matter at all, so Grethe was right on the money.

"Well, if you forgot that, I figure you don't remember this, either. I'm opposed to sending children like you to the battlefield, after all... Fighting to the very end may be your pride and identity as Eighty-Six, but this is one hill I'm willing to die on. If you insist on fighting to the very end, fighting by your side until that final moment is my duty."

"..."

"This country you risked life and limb to reach was a far cry from paradise. But I do want you to remember one thing. No one in this country wishes for you to die. On the contrary, we all wish for you to live. Me, the division commander...and him."

"It's been a while, everyone."

Shin blinked in surprise at that calm, unexpected voice. It didn't come via Para-RAID, but from a wired communication line outside the Nachzehrer.

"What are you doing here, Ernst?"

"Uh, hey, I'm the Federacy's supreme commander, y'know? This is a decisive battle with the lives and territory of the Federacy and its neighbors on the line. It's only natural for me to come to urge my soldiers to battle, isn't it? Especially when you're the ones who'll be the linchpin of this mission. Right?"

Ernst took a deep breath, and his tone switched to that of a leader, a man who'd directed the Federacy for many years.

"The fate of the Federacy, its neighbors, and indeed humanity itself hinges on the Nordlicht squadron's success. Destroy the Morpho, no matter what... We're counting on you."

"Yes, sir."

"And... I have another mission of the utmost importance for you."

Lifting his head, Ernst nodded earnestly.

"Come back to us. All of you."

Something about the request felt oddly hypocritical. As if he wasn't so much worried for them as he was concerned for himself.

"...We'll try."

"That's not good enough. Come back, no matter what."

That uncomfortable feeling remained all the same, but by contrast, the Federacy's temporary president and the man who was, on paper, their adoptive father, spoke earnestly.

"You wanted to fight to the very end, didn't you? For this Federacy, fighting until the very end doesn't mean death. It means living to see what lies beyond the war. So come back to us, no matter what... As many times as it takes."

"Yes. Return to me, no matter what..."

Ernst whispered after closing the intercom. He was in the commander's seat of the western front's integrated headquarters. He had taken off the mass-produced blue business suit that had become his trademark as president over the past decade, now donning the Federacy military's steel-blue uniform in its stead.

He'd met them for the first time here, on the western front, although the exact place was a bit off. He'd come to the battlefield to encourage the troops and received a report that they'd recovered child soldiers from a foreign country as they'd defeated a Tank type that was out on a headhunt. He'd taken pity on them at first and wanted to give them the joy he could never grant to his unborn child. But more than anything...

The temporary president narrowed his ash-colored eyes as he felt a cold, cruel, empty smile play over his lips.

A country that wouldn't save wounded children... A country where children aren't allowed to be happy... A world that doesn't hesitate to send children to their deaths just to meet its own ends...is as distant as can be from the vision of humankind *she* believed in...

Ernst gave a long sigh. Like a firedrake exhaling flames after having grown weary of the world, as if wishing to reduce anything and everything to ash...

"...Or else, I will destroy this world."

A countdown to the beginning of the operation was displayed on the headquarters' main screen, currently clocking at five minutes. The chief of staff, who stood at the information center at the bottom of the room, cast a glance at Ernst, who gave him a small nod.

†

October 9, 2144. First light.

The temporary president, sitting on the commander's seat, nodded to the lieutenant general occupying the vice commander's seat. The chief of staff began to speak. He was clad in the Federacy's steel-blue uniform and cap. His hands rested on the hilt of a thin saber, still in its scabbard and bound

in leather straps, with its tip against the floor, acting as an impromptu conductor's baton.

"All soldiers, at attention."

The chief of staff's voice was broadcast to all units in the western front's army through a secured line.

"The western front's army will now begin its march into the Legion's territories."

Everyone held their breath as they listened to the cold voice, their tension strained to its maximum. Each unit had the operation's objective explained to them as well as their role in it during a briefing prior to their sortie. There was no need to go into any further details.

The western front's army, the United Kingdom's military, and the Alliance's forces' objective was the retaking of the Highway Corridor. And the strike force would act as the spearhead that would penetrate the depths of the Legion's territory and destroy the Morpho lurking there. This operation was tantamount to facing the full bulk of the Legion's forces; neither failure nor retreat could be considered.

"This operation is not just for the sake of the Federal Republic of Giad, the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, or the Alliance of Wald. This is the largest operation in the history of humankind and will influence the fates of our neighboring countries that may have survived the Legion's onslaught, as well as the fate of the human race. You will act as the stalwart shield that guards our allied neighbors and the mighty sword that will cut open a path for humankind's future. Never forget that the god of war never favors the cowards, but gives his blessings to the valiant! Go forth and defend the flag of the two-headed eagle with your lives!"

"Attention!"

Ten kilometers east of the front line, an artillery unit was deployed, lining up the muzzles of its cannons. The 155 mm traction howitzers stood majestically, their turrets extending like spears poised against the heavens, and 155 mm self-propelled artillery cannons of the same type were loaded onto trucks. Only a few old-type 105 mm howitzers and discontinued 203 mm howitzers were deployed along the battery. Multi-launch rocket systems aimed their magazines of forty toward the dark western sky.

"Our mission is to provide covering fire for our allies' advance! While they're crawling through the mud, let's help 'em out by blowing those shitty scrap heaps straight to hell!"

The stressed artillery soldiers cracked a strained smile at those words that ridiculed the armored infantry and Feldreß who fought with their heads down in the quagmires of the battlefield. The artillery forces' commander looked around and nodded. The long black hair under her cap was proof of her youth, and her soft, pale face was accented by black-rimmed glasses.

"For our comrades on the front lines and those warriors going even farther beyond, keep shooting, no matter what! Even if the gun barrels burst and angels rain down from heaven to claim us all, never stop shooting! All hands, prepare for bombardment!"

Meanwhile, on the front lines, at the camp of a certain armored unit...

"We sortie after the support fire! Don'cha chicken out and hold us back, y'hear?! Anyone who falls behind's gonna have the letters they wrote for their girlfriend read out loud! Any virgins who don't have a girl back home will have the letters they wrote to their mommies read out loud instead!"

As the armored unit's commander's coarse voice echoed loudly, amplified by a speaker, Vánagandrs awoke from standby one after another, and accompanying combat trucks loaded with armored infantry revved their engines.

As their power packs began picking up their RPM, the high-pitched screeching of the Vánagandrs blended with the staccato of diesel engines. This grating harmony pierced into the azure sky, still rich with traces of night.

They didn't bother connecting the data link in the first place. It would be useless in the Legion's territories, under the Eintagsfliege's influence, anyway. Gazing at the ranks of his consort planes through his unit's three optical sensors, a young officer—hardly in his mid-twenties—brought the external speaker's receiver to his mouth.

"Don't sit idly by and let the Republic's monsters protect you... Show those crazy berserkers what the pride of the Federacy is all about!"

Hearing the cry of the armored unit's commander echo into the dark-purple morning air from his external speaker, the armored infantry commander smirked inside his vehicle.

"I swear, if nothing else, these youngsters sure know how to get fired up..."

He was clad in an armored exoskeleton and shouldered his favored 12.7 mm rifle. The helmet covering his face was now turned up, revealing the rectangular, aged face of a man in his forties. He feigned ignorance, out of some sort of tired listlessness, as his subordinates joked that he looked less like a veteran armored infantry soldier and more like an exhausted office worker in a crowded train.

He looked around at the clumsy, bulky silhouettes of his subordinates seated on sheets in the darkened cargo hold, closed by an armored pane, and he parted his lips without a hint of enthusiasm.

"Well then, boys. I'll leave all the grand speeches about pride and glory to those who know how to make 'em, but let's just focus on getting back alive for today... That said—"

He sneaked a glance at a photograph of his wife and children, attached to the interior of his armored exoskeleton, while maintaining his poker face as the other soldiers shrugged.

"We're gonna need to have somewhere to return to if we're planning on coming back at all. So let's give our all to defending! For our sakes, and..."

...for the sake of the youngsters in the armored units, who lead the charge while fully aware they'll likely be the first to be crushed by the Legion. And for the young soldiers who are even farther away, who went on

to spearhead the operation even though they knew it might be a one-way trip, who dived headfirst into the heart of Legion territory in spite of it all.

The uncharacteristic sentimentality he was feeling right now forced a smile onto his lips, and the armored infantry captain lowered his helmet to hide it. The optical feed projected directly to his retina overlapped with his sight, and at its edge, the countdown to the operation's beginning ticked down.

Ten more seconds...

Three, two—

“For our brothers-in-arms and the homeland we'll return to.”

...zero.

The western front's commander in chief nodded back at the chief of staff, and Ernst parted his lips coldly. He was clad in a steel-blue uniform and a regulation cap and wore his overcoat like a cloak across his shoulders.

“Commence operation.”

“Fiiiiire!”

As ordered, the entire artillery formation's howitzers and multi-launch rocket systems, as well as the infantry unit's mortars, roared in unison. The shock waves kicked up clouds of dust behind them. Shells flew into the heavens in a parabola like flaming arrows, leaving only tremors in their wake.

They covered the eastern skies like a wall of steel, blocking the faint morning starlight before reaching their zenith and descending with shrill screeches as they pierced the Legion's defenses.

“Orders to charge are in! C'mon, boys, go, go, go!”

“Don't let the morons in the strike force cut ahead of us, men! Anyone who needs a pick-me-up is entitled to one swift kick in the ass from yours truly!”

The rear artillery unit's support fire was still going strong. Not giving any mind to the barrel's overheating, the bombardment raged on even as they changed positions. Between the incessant, earthshaking cacophony of the high-aperture shells, an armored unit of Vánagandrs got into a wedge formation and began their advance. They reached maximum speed in the blink of an eye. Combat cars filled with infantry followed swiftly behind.

With their engines and power packs roaring a ferocious battle cry, the deluge of steel rushed over the battlefield awash with dawn's light.

†

The contested zones lay in the boundary between the territories of the Legion and humankind. There, as the silhouettes of autonomous machines standing at attention intermingled with the darkness of dawn's hour, a single Scout type turned its bearing up to the eastern sky. Suddenly, its highly efficient optical sensors picked up a flash.

In the next moment, a violent bombardment rained down upon it.

A swarm of self-forging warheads dispersed into the skies above, each with its radar activated and locking onto a target. They soared over the armored weapon at two thousand meters per second, crashing onto the Legion unit like a sledgehammer.

The impact repeated in quick succession, powerful enough to skewer even the Dinosauria. The ground trembled as sediment soared into the heavens, forming a brown curtain over the horizon. But that veil was soon torn to pieces as a unit of Vánagandrs rushed in, pursuing any remaining Legion with the ferocity of a pack of starving wolves.

†

The integrated headquarters' main screen displayed each unit's desperate struggle as icons shifted and clashed. The Legion's forces outnumbered those of the three countries participating in the operation. And yet, their forces' blue icons progressed into the autonomous machines' lines, cutting through their forces, drawing them in and crushing them.

"They moved... We lured them out...!"

A Legion armored force began descending from the enemy territory to intercept them. Turning around to confirm that the chief of staff gave them the go-ahead, a member of the control personnel spoke into an intercom with a sharp voice.

"We've successfully lured the Legion's frontline forces. Shifting to Phase Two. Integrated headquarters to 1,028th control room. The Nachzehrer is permitted to take off!"

"Let's go!"

As the high-pitched screech of the four jet engines on both the Nachzehrer's wings reached Shin's ears, the electric catapult kicked the four-hundred-ton fuselage into the air.

"...!"

The intense acceleration was unfamiliar for his body, which was used to both a transport plane's takeoff and the Juggernaut's high-speed maneuvering. The electromagnetic waves scrambled white noise over his main screen, and the next moment, a faint-blue dawn sky spread out before him. Traversing the underground runway in less than an instant, the Nachzehrer leaned as it flew out above the surface, soaring with the force of its acceleration.

His screen's view of the chilly azure skies of autumn switched to one of the sleeping plains, which then drifted away behind them in the blink of an eye. The Nachzehrer's speed was blinding. To think a low-altitude flight could be rapid enough to allow for the possibility of such a sight...

"Th-this is scarier than I thought..."

"Wh-what lunatic thought of making this thing?!"

Grethe cackled from the cockpit, a shrill laughter that was unlike her usual demeanor. As if she was high on adrenaline, like her blood was pumping from being in a gambling hall for the first time in ages.

"Having fearless soldiers like you say that is an honor! This baby can fly at eight hundred kilometers per hour, by the way, and we have one hundred kilometers and some change until the target... Enjoy your nine-minute ride while it lasts!"

†

In the sky, two thousand meters above the Legion's territories, a single Legion unit hovered, glutonously receiving countless reports of clashes and skirmishes with the three countries. The Eintagsfliege's parent unit, the Observation Control type—Rabe.

Commanding the Eintagsfliege and the Stachelschwein, this airborne early-warning system kept a vigilant, all-seeing eye over the state of humankind's military movements. Its 122-meter-long wingspan was equipped with solar power-generated panels. This gigantic silver raven would remain airborne until it was shot down or until its lifespan as an autonomous machine came to an end.

Linking up with the Eintagsfliege as its extensions, it also integrated and analyzed communications between the Legion and relayed orders it received to their appropriate recipients, serving the double role of the Legion's delegation unit.

As it received a constant deluge of information, it instantly analyzed and judged it. Concluding that the network under its jurisdiction had insufficient forces to withstand the assault, it launched an appeal to the wide area network. As it launched that report to the Supreme Commander unit that supervised the wide area network, the Rabe kept a vigilant eye on the enemy forces' invasion and swiveled its wings as it continued its lax, high-altitude flight.

<Acknowledged. No Face to all units linked to first area network. Invasions from the Federacy, United Kingdom, and Alliance confirmed.>

The Supreme Commander unit's directive circulated through the first area network consisting of the military forces divided between the Federacy, the Republic, the United Kingdom, and the Alliance like an electronic tone traveling through the air. A voiceless, wordless whisper from one machine to another.

The Supreme Commander unit was a Shepherd whose call sign was No Face. It had lost the ability to even discern the faces of its wife and beloved daughter, but its human conviction alone remained intact. The fact that this ghost was capable of enjoying such cruel irony was proof of the education it had been graced with during its lifetime.

The Supreme Commander unit judged that this situation was within their predictions. If guided weapons were insufficient, and they lacked long-range artillery weapons to match the Legion's, their only remaining option was to

stage a direct assault. It seemed the three countries chose not to adhere to their defenses and await the conclusion where the Railgun reduced them to ash.

They were different from his old motherland, which chose to shut itself away inside its walls, only to eventually be crushed under their weight. If nothing else, their offensive against the Republic was going according to schedule.

Their efforts having been hampered for the past two months, they launched that attack after biding their time during the four-sided offensive. The Federacy's forces deployed immediately, as if they had foreseen everything down to the moment the operation would begin.

This was a phenomenon No Face had encountered before. It received repeated reports from one of the fronts of its old motherland, the Republic of San Magnolia. It was one unique sector, where every ambush or surprise attack seemed to have failed. And perhaps the fact that the Federacy was capable of pinpointing and retaliating against the Railgun, despite it being deployed over one hundred kilometers away and under the Eintagsfliege's jamming, could be attributed to this.

Today, they would have to compensate for those multiple setbacks. Their enemy must be annihilated, at all costs.

<All units, standby mode disengaged. Tactical algorithms set to extermination combat mode.>

The murderous instincts programmed into them—the combat protocols set by the now-ruined Empire—spurred them to battle without any need for reason or justification. A simple impulse to slaughter all those classified as the enemy that would be transmitted forever, so long as they were not destroyed.

The Supreme Commander unit had long since stopped thinking it was fruitless. It had lost its words years ago, when it died on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield.

<Commence extermination.>

†

"The frontline units have begun charging in. Command car to all vehicles, we're moving in, too. Hurry up your preparations!"

As the mobile strike force engaged the enemy, it was the artillery unit's role to strike not at the enemy their comrades were facing, but at their reinforcements coming from farther into enemy territory. As the mobile strike force pressed into enemy territory, they would inevitably have to bring their heavy artillery forward as well, advancing along scorched earth.

"We're moving our bombardment zone forward! Let's blow the mugs off those shitty scrap heaps—"

Leaning out of the open-top armored command car's window, the young woman serving as the artillery unit's commander shouted orders into the

wireless receiver in her hand but soon raised her eyes as a sense of dread washed over her.

At that moment, the blue skies darkened as a metallic gray rocket soundlessly descended from the western sky. It was the Skorpion types' anti-artillery fire. Ameise equipped with superior anti-artillery radar calculated their location within two minutes and linked their data with the Skorpion types, allowing them to fire at them with terrifying accuracy.

"T-take coverrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr—!"

But her shout only made her own reactions more sluggish. The artillery commander could only spend that final, elongated moment gazing at the 155 mm beacon of death descending toward her.

"Captain!"

The command car's driver lunged toward her, pushing her away from the car with his large frame and sending her tumbling to the ground.

Impact.

It was a barrage consisting of multipurpose, anti-armor, antipersonnel shells. The high-speed projectiles unleashed shock waves, explosions of flames, and barrages of shrapnel traveling at eight thousand meters per second, which scattered the artillery formation to the winds.

After taking a direct hit from a 155 mm shell—capable of even destroying a Vánagandr at point-blank—the command car was blown apart. The artillery captain's now-cracked black-rimmed glasses were knocked off by the blast and went flying through the air. She watched from under the driver's body, which hung over her.

In case of bombardment, facing toward the blast and docking minimizes injuries to some extent, and compared to open air, a human body is much thicker and serves as a far better shield against shrapnel. Thanks to the driver guarding her with his own body, the artillery captain escaped any fatal damage. The driver, however...

Feeling the driver's body suddenly become heavier, the officer struggled to crawl out from beneath him as his weight bore down on her, and then she felt her breath catch in her throat.

"...Corporal—"

In all likelihood...the *thing* lying before her was what remained of the driver. Retrieving her glasses from the ground nearby, the artillery captain got to her feet. Looking around, she couldn't find a single trace of the artillery formation anymore. Her unit had been reduced to mounds of flesh and steel, decorating the vision of hell that descended upon the battlefield without warning. Without a microphone in her hand, she shouted from the pit of her stomach, a crazed look in her eyes as she filled her lungs with the stench of blood and burnt flesh.

"—Damage report! This battle isn't over yet!"

In the faint predawn darkness, the grassy fields wavered like the waves of a stormy sea. Morning dew and sparks splashed into the air as metallic silver and gray metal clashed, cutting through the night air. The armored unit,

consisting of Vánagandrs, armored infantry, and combat trucks, faced off against a mixed force of Dinosauria, Löwe, and Ameise in a melting pot of strife and battle.

The Dinosauria and Löwe were unmatched on open plains, where there were no obstructions to hamper their high mobility and firepower. Having no choice but to step onto this battlefield despite their inferiority, the Federacy engaged every opponent with multiple units, each relying on their consort units to create a distraction that would allow them to turn the situation in their favor. It was an inevitably savage battle, with their attempts to circle the Legion successful at times, and at other times hampered.

And in the many blind spots formed during such a battle, *those* lay in wait.

Sitting in his Vánagandr's rear seat, the armored unit's commander noticed it in the optical sensor's feed. At the edge of a multilegged tank's angular turret, a small shadow grabbed onto the rims of his unit's armor and climbed up. It was the figure of a child around three years old—an unusual sight on the battlefield.

He stood dumbfounded as he realized a moment too late. It crept up over his turret, and he noticed its lower half was severed and missing. A human would not be able to move in this condition. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, a fatal wound. Which meant *this* wasn't human.

An anti-tank self-propelled mine. They were weapons used in the early stages of the war, when there were still civilians on the front lines. They caught the attention of soldiers by appearing under the guise of children.

His Vánagandr's heavy machine guns were equipped behind its turret, and as such, the mine dipped in an angle out of their range. As soon as it clung to him, there was nothing to be done. The infantile human-shaped explosive crept over the turret. He stared at its large, faceless head through his optical sensor. The synthetic voice of a child being emitted from it was oddly clear, despite it not having a mouth.

"...Ma...ma."

"...Oh, you motherfuckers."

"Sorry, not letting that happen."

A light impact shook the Vánagandr. An armored exoskeleton—a mere one hundred kilograms compared to the Feldreß's weight of fifty tons—climbed on top of it. An aged, joking voice spoke to him via a direct line.

"You kids can't die before we do. Your parents'll never stop crying."

There was no time to shoot the 12.7 mm heavy assault rifle in his hands or to rush over and kick it away. So the armored infantry captain jumped at the self-propelled mine. The gross weight of his body within the exoskeleton was much lighter than the Vánagandr, but it still wasn't a weight the child-size self-propelled mine could support. Its hands let go of the armor, and they rolled off the Vánagandr's gun turret together.

Then, there was a flash of light.

“Captain...?!”

The mine carried an explosive designed to penetrate a Vánagandr's armor. Not a scrap remained of the thin, flimsy armor of the exoskeleton or the frail body it had protected. Something fluttered about, grazing his optical sensor. A burning photograph... A family photo of two parents and their three children.

God dammit...!

Before he could even bite his lip in frustration, he punched the interior of his cockpit in a blind rage. Now that they had lost their commander, he had to get everyone in the armored infantry unit—everyone who was still alive—home safely.

“Units two and three, on my mark! Infantry unit, stay on our six! ...Shit!”

He swore and shut off the intercom. He then shot a glare at the black sky—just behind the Dinosauria towering over him.

Have you made it yet, you damn Eighty-Six ...?!

†

The fierce fighting of the Federacy army reached the Nachzehrer by way of a wireless transmission that traveled across the blockade. The RAID Device was still in experimental stages and hadn't been mass-produced yet, with only the Nordlicht squadron currently using it. The wireless transmission, thick with static and garbled noise from the jamming of the Eintagsfliege, deployed through the battlefield, reaching Shin's ears as he sat inside his Juggernaut.

“The 225th Armored Battalion has reached phase line Zinc. Consolidating our sphere of influence until allied reinforcements arrive. The 417th Infantry Company and the 139th Relief Platoon, headed your way. Preparations underway to send all injured troops back. Commander of the 32nd Armored Battalion, KIA. 775th Infantry Company to 828th Artillery Formation, requesting covering fire. Yeah, no problem, drop it on top of us.”

Each of the transmissions was said in the midst of wild, tumultuous battle and delivered in shouts and bellows. On the other sides of those transmissions, one could hear screams, wails, cursing, and battle cries, all competing to drown the others out. It was valiant courage that straddled the line to madness—and frantic desperation.

Raiden muttered in a whisper:

“—The Federacy isn’t retreating.”

The swarm of Legion washed over them time and time again, shaving off more and more and more of their forces, but the Federacy wouldn't retreat even a single step. On the contrary, with their armored units serving as a wedge in the Legion's defenses, the following units pushed forward, paying no heed to their vanguards that wrenched open the gap and got obliterated behind them.

No retreat. They pushed and pushed, as if to say that should they stumble even a step back, something precious would be taken from them. In

practice, that was exactly what would have happened; should the front fall apart, should the Morpho be allowed to advance to this position, all that lay behind them would be exposed to its hellish onslaught. For the Eighty-Six, the Republic wasn't their homeland, and the Alba who did call it home would never think to fight for it.

"To defend..."

...one's family. One's home. One's comrades. The values of one's country. And at the base of it all...the place where one belongs.

The voice of the Alba boy he'd once heard but would never hear again echoed in his mind.

My sister. The sea.

He'd fought with that wish in his heart...and died holding on to it.

Why do you...?

He couldn't answer that question. And that was because he had nothing to fight for... Nothing to defend.

Another communication reached them. The radio brought to life the voice of a unit defending some important position that was isolated, surrounded, and under attack. *Defend to the death. Defend to the death*, they said. *Hold on just a little longer, and if you do, our trump card—those annoying Eighty-Six kids—will destroy it for us. And then we'll win.*

Someone's elated chuckle came in through the Resonance.

"If we destroy the Morpho. Right, and then..."

"Guess we've got to live up to some expectations, huh...? I mean. Look at how hard they're trying."

His comrades exchanged words jovially, but Shin didn't answer... Because he sensed a new change in the movement of the Legion force deployed ahead of them.

"Lieutenant Colonel."

"Yeah, they're on to us... They're trying to block our route."

"Can't we evade them?"

"It'll be difficult. This girl's bad at making turns."

"Can't we evade them?"

"Since Landkräfte fly so close to the ground, they're incapable of inclining the fuselage to make turns. I could change bearing by moving the rudder, but that would take too long." As Grethe spoke, she was probably pulling up the control stick, increasing elevation to raise the Nachzehrer's nose. Landkräfte were aircrafts optimized to fly while skimming the ground, but they were still capable of gaining altitude.

Gaining elevation at the cost of speed, the Nachzehrer reached a height that could be considered midair in the blink of an eye. They were finally in the sky that was stolen away from humankind by the Eintagsfliege and the Stachelschwein, at an altitude that made them susceptible to antiair fire.

"What are you...?"

"If you touch down here, you'll just end up fighting the bastards trying to block our path. It'd defeat the purpose of taking her out in the first place."

Shin could hear a siren blaring on the other side of the Resonance: lock-on alerts. The radiation detection alarm warning of exposure to the Stachelschwein's laser sights. And that very moment, the rear cargo made a heavy, bulky sound as its hatch opened slowly.

"I was right to have the research team prepare these just in case. They're a rush job, so they might look a bit flimsy, but they should function just fine."

The Processors suddenly realized the Reginleifs were fixed not to the floor of the cargo space but to odd, tough-looking pallets blanketing it all the way to the cargo hatch and even its guardrails.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I wouldn't do something as embarrassing as crash this baby, and I brought a spare unit just in case... I told you before, didn't I? I used to be an Operator, too. You Eighty-Six aren't the only ones who don't like those clumsy Vánagandrs."

There were fifteen Processors but sixteen rigs on board. A single Reginleif stood deep inside the cargo hold, fixed directly to the floor.

"...Lieutenant Colonel, there are two companies ahead, probably armored companies consisting mostly of Löwe. If you want to serve as a distraction, there's no need to actually engage them. Take cover in the forest after you make contact with them."

"Well, thanks for the advice, but...don't underestimate me, you brat."

Shin fell silent, obviously dumbfounded, and Grethe laughed loudly, a hint of affection to her voice.

"I'll be seeing you then— Godspeed!"

Leaving that old-fashioned word of prayer behind, she shut down the Resonance, and simultaneously, the lock on the guardrails was released. Fifteen Reginleifs slid down the rails, a shrill voice ringing out and sparks flying as metal skidded against metal, and in the next moment, they were free-falling.

Being a ground weapon, the Reginleif naturally had no means of reducing its gravity. As they crashed, they caught sight of the Nachzehrer's silhouette against the golden sky, lurching forward as it tried to turn. The silver background of the city below reflected against its wings as antiair autocannon fire grazed the skies, trying to mow it down. They plummeted toward a group of skyscrapers, falling between them. And just beyond there, the sound of repeated moans and cries of resentment filled Shin's consciousness.

Is this it?

Immediately afterward, the parachutes set in their pallets spread open, and they began decelerating rapidly. The sudden deceleration pushing them from behind made the pilots lurch forward, but the four-point seatbelts yanked them back. When they next raised their heads, the descent pallet touched down on the ground.

The Nachzehrer's ascent and subsequent loss of speed softened the descent of the parachutes, but it was a hard landing at a speed that couldn't be called safe under any circumstances. Even with the pallet's buffering

system, the powerful vibrations rattled even the Processors, who, despite being used to the Reginleif's high-mobility movements, had to hold back from biting their tongues.

Gouging into the green fields and dying them black, the airdrop pallets stood still. Their locks releasing automatically, fifteen Reginleifs staggered unsteadily onto Legion territory. Fido's optical sensor was also unfocused as it descended. (Was it even possible for an AI to get dizzy?) They shook their heads to drive away the nausea and then raised their heads—on the other side of the forest cutting into these uninhabited plains, a pillar of black smoke generated by jet fuel billowed into the sky, as if serving as testimony for the force of the flames that created it.

†

"N-Nachzehrer, signal lost! The Nachzehrer's signal has been cut off!"

The 1,028th Trial Unit's control personnel practically screamed this report, and a confirmation immediately followed from the integrated headquarters. The chief of staff asked promptly, trying to ascertain the situation:

"What's the Nordlicht squadron's status?"

"They were airdropped before we lost the Nachzehrer's signal, and they landed five kilometers away from the target area... But..."

As they made the report, the control officer bit their lip. The Reginleifs were fast. While the Legion swarmed the Nachzehrer, they should be able to advance into Kreutzbeck City.

"First Lieutenant Nouzen reported they've encountered the enemy! They're currently engaging the Legion unit in the vicinity of the Morpho!"

†

A heavy, skillfully fired barrage of four *155 mm tank turrets*, a 76 mm coaxial secondary cannon, and a 14 mm revolving machine gun swept through the streets. As they infiltrated the city, Shin squinted at the sight of a platoon of Dinosauria lying in wait for them. For the Legion, the Morpho was a strategic weapon that served as their anti-Federacy, anti-humanity trump card. It was only natural they would tighten their defenses around it, but it was still a nuisance.

While it may be better than the Republic's aluminum coffin, the Reginleif's armor couldn't guard against the ludicrous strength of a 155 mm tank shell. Tracking the white shadows of their evading opponents, the Dinosauria swerved their turrets. Relying on their high-fidelity automatic recharge devices, they viciously continued their rapid-firing cycle as they pursued the Juggernauts.

Walls were pierced, pillars were gouged, and buildings collapsed as rows of bullet holes ripped through them. On the other side of the crumbling

rubble, eight turrets locked onto Bernholdt's platoon as it tried to sneak around their enemies.

Undertaker landed behind the Legion's backs. As it did, the high-frequency blade it swung down slashed through the rear armor of a Dinosauria and then fired at a second one. A moment later, Laughing Fox jumped down from another collapsing building and fired mid-somersault in a stunt-like maneuver, downing the other two enemies.

“—Shin! The next one’s coming!”

Shin didn't need to be told. Undertaker and Laughing Fox jumped to the left and right, evading a barrage of machine-gun fire that grazed the ground where they'd stood not a second prior. The Federacy armored even its infantry, so normal 7.62 mm bullets were inefficient against them. As such, the Ameise that attacked them were instead equipped with anti-light-armor 14 mm heavy machine guns.

In the next moment, the line of fire the two had just vacated was filled with a barrage from the rear-guard Juggernauts. Wehrwolf was nestled between the remains of two Dinosauria, Snow Witch fired from behind rubble, and Gunslinger scaled the surface of a building to shoot. Their grappling arms were equipped with heavy machine guns that roared ruthlessly as they fired a spray of bullets. The lightly armored Ameise were torn to bits by the concentrated fire, and the Nordlicht squadron used that gap to advance deeper into the enemy's territory, with Shin taking the lead.

Fido, who had hung behind during combat until needed, linked up with them, and after a short while, Bernholdt and his platoon joined the row as well.

“Are you all right, Sergeant?”

“I could ask you the same thing. What the hell were those insane stunts you pulled...? Yeah, no casualties so far, First Lieutenant. But when they’ve tightened their defenses this much, even those sharp ears of yours won’t help us get through without a fight.”

Even though Shin could perceive the Legion's movements, with the enemy lying in wait for them, their only choice was a frontal assault.

Being a highway to the neighboring countries and a place where the railroad network converged, old Kreutzbeck City placed more emphasis on its appearance than most other old Imperial cities. High-rises made of glass and metal stood close together, and the multiple overhead structures that were linked in a nearly organic manner made the city look like it had been pulled out of the near future.

And in those many hiding places, the Legion lurked. The Grauwolf stamped across the walls of glass-paned buildings, crushing them as they sped through. Löwe dashed across the overhead highway. The Ameise crawled in the gaps between buildings, their sensitive sensor units glistening faintly, and the Skorpion types' anti-armor projectiles soared over the skyscrapers.

Through the intervals of the Legion's movements, fifteen Juggernauts sped through the city ruins, taking the shortest route they could to the high-speed-railway terminal in the city center, where Frederica's knight lay in wait, his lamentations being their guide.

"I'll kill them all."

The blind, hollow murderous intent Shin had grown used to hearing was directed at them.

"Kill them all."

They were getting closer. The Morpho's moans roared over them like a thunderclap or cannon fire, its intensity penetrating their bodies like a shock wave. The bloodcurdling screams rumbled all the way to the pits of their stomachs, freezing them in terror and making them clench their teeth.

Does ceaselessly, mindlessly raging like this ever give you peace...?

Does being reduced to a killing machine consumed by bloodlust and madness mean you don't have to think about anything else? Does it help distract you from the fact that you no longer have anything to live for...? Perhaps Rei was like that, too...

A single doubt. A single question skidded across the surface of his mind like a thrown rock.

If I had died before reaching him... If, on that final battlefield on the Eighty-Sixth Sector, I had gotten killed... If my body had been destroyed in such a way that the Legion couldn't take me... Would Rei have lost his purpose and become like this ghost just ahead? A monster that's only capable of spewing hatred against the world itself?

And if I had lost my brother before I gunned him down... If I had been unable to achieve my goal, would I...?

In the next moment, the Eighty-Six—the most battle hardened and accustomed to horror—held their breath and froze in fear.

"...Whoa."

"What is this...? It's massive..."

It stood in a traffic circle bathed in inorganic colors, the concrete pavement lined with streetlights. Dawn should have already broken by now, but the deployed Eintagsfliege darkened the sky, painting everything in an eerie silver gloom.

And beneath the silver sky, there *it* sat, its elongated form stretched out in defiance. Crouching, encased in a crystalline cocoon formed by the station's overhead frosted glass dome, its abnormal size capable of toppling a building. A normal residential building could easily fit in its stomach, with its cannon's barrel—large enough for a person to comfortably walk on top of it—now perpendicular to the ground.

It was like bearing witness to the seven-headed dragon of Revelation. Looking at it threw their sense of scale completely out of whack. Just being near it made them feel threatened under the sheer weight of its menace. It made Shin recall a sensation he'd since forgotten from his childhood.

It reminded him of a sight he'd seen in a museum once, probably before they were sent to the internment camps. A specimen of some primordial whale's skeleton, large enough to fill up the entire hall. The sheer size of it had made young Shin doubt he was looking at the bones of a creature that had once been alive.

He couldn't imagine something of that size living and moving about. He couldn't believe a creature of that size existed in the same place he was. It was a creature on an entirely different scale. All he could do was hold his breath and stare. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been awestruck.

He opened his mouth, trying to shake off the fear.

"1,028th control room, we've got visual on the target atop the Kreutzbeck high-speed-railway terminal. Preparing to engage."

"Læraðr HQ, roger that... The United Kingdom's recon drones have arrived nearby, as well. It really is a Railgun... That size...!"

"First Lieutenant!"

Bernholdt cut into the conversation, his voice thick with tension. Above the probably newly erected double rails, on the other side of the frosted glass dome, a blue optical sensor lit up, glaring at them like a will-o'-the-wisp. A creaking reached their ears even from hundreds of meters away, as the massive turret on its rear began swiveling, the rumbling of its interior mechanisms rattling the silvery sky.

THE CAUTION DRONES

Railgun Type



Morpho

[A R M A M E N T S]

800 mm railgun ×1
40 mm antiair antiground electro-magnetic Vulcan cannon ×6

[S P E C S]

Total Width: 40.2 m
Total Height: 11.4 m
Total Weight: 1,400 t
Cruising Speed: 200 kmh [movement along old interstate railway tracks]
Main Armament Maximum Range: 400 km

Note: This unit has assimilated the neural network of Kiriya Nouzen, the knight of the Empire's orphan, Frederica.

Its name is derived from a type of butterfly. It poses a massive threat to the Federacy and its neighboring countries with its railgun, capable of long-range bombardment. As it is optimized in artillery warfare, it is vulnerable to missiles and explosives as well as ground assault. It compensates for the former weakness with its abundant antiair armaments and the latter with a strike force of Dinosauria at its beck and call. In addition, due to its railgun requiring massive amounts of electricity, it is far larger than other types of Legion, which impedes its mobility. However, it moves in the style of railway guns along the old interstate railway, allowing it to rapidly shift its position.

“It’s moving already?! Are its repairs complete...?!”

“I know the Legion don’t operate on the same logic we do, but still, this is insane...!”

...No. The lower part of the Morpho’s hull had multiple leglike appendages folded into it. It wasn’t moving. The Legion put its mobility as a railway gun on the back burner and prioritized restoring its firing functionality... Shin felt a sense of unease settle in the back of his mind. When fixing it, would they really exchange the heavy barrel before the legs that supported it...?

Suddenly, the voices of the Legion around them receded like a retreating wave. Before Shin could even question why, the answer became evident. The Morpho looking down at them, on the other side of their locked gazes. Its voice was...

The voices of the Shepherds who served as the Legion’s commanders rang especially clearly, standing out even among a large group. That was how Shin perceived them. And the cries and curses of the Morpho, which drowned out the countless moans of the Legion... Its countless screams of resentment...

...all disappeared.

And at the same time, the same screams swelled up somewhere in the distance. Roars of hatred and murderous intent toward all humankind, toward the world itself. The blind, enraged voice of his blood relative. The knight he’d never met in his lifetime.

A new RAID user joined their Sensory Resonance. The desperate scream of the girl who had not joined them for this mission echoed in his ears.

“Get down, Shinei!”

It was Frederica, whom they had left behind at the base.

“That thing you’re looking at right now isn’t Kiri anymore!”

The moment he understood, a shiver ran up Shin’s spine.

We’ve been tricked.

Shin turned his gaze, feeling a pair of frozen black eyes open slowly and fix on them. Tracing that stare, Shin zoomed his main screen onto a single point: a thin gap between two buildings. An elongated shadow leaned against a steel pylon bending under its weight, far in the horizon. It raised its head like some ancient serpent god from the myths of the Far East, aiming the muzzle of its massive gun in their direction.

“All units! Retreat, right n—!”

What appeared to be a muzzle flash—but was, in fact, the flash of an arc discharge—blinded them. The Railgun’s bombardment, fired at a flat trajectory, then leveled an entire section of the city.

†

<Pale Rider to No Face. Fixed firing schedule complete.>

Kiriya transmitted his report to the Supreme Commander unit from within the new body he'd been transferred to.

<Luring of special hostile element, call sign: Báleygr, successful. Estimate: target eliminated.>

For years, the Shepherds had taken note of this special hostile element capable of sensing their incoming raids, discerning their assault routes, and identifying commander units. At first, it appeared in the Republic's eastern front, but over the past year, it crossed their territories and moved to the Federacy's western front.

There were no multiple instances of this element detected; in other words, it didn't employ any technology or knowledge that could be replicated or transmitted. In all likelihood, it was the unique ability of a lone individual. Its threat level was extremely high, and its removal was set as a priority of maximum level.

Fortunately, Kiriya had faced a mobile unit piloted by this hostile element twice in battle. While he hadn't gathered sufficient data to make a perfect analysis, it did know enough to make a simple one... Enough to discern a weakness in that hostile element.

<The results of the analysis were correct. Báleygr cannot detect spare units in a state of stasis.>

The hostile element was observed to have a unique fixation with a certain Heavy Tank class. However, it did not react in any way to another unit carrying the same dead person's data until it activated.

It didn't notice the Shepherd's spare unit when it was in a state of stasis, before the destroyed Dinosauria's brain structure data was loaded onto it.

A command from the Supreme Commander unit returned.

<No Face to Pale Rider. Requesting confirmation of Báleygr's elimination.>

Kiriya almost felt like scoffing. Yes, it had been a most painful thorn in their sides for the last few months. According to the wide area network kernel's decision, the large-scale offensive earlier and the resulting extermination would have taken seven days. Kiriya recalled noting the ironic similarity to the story of Genesis. But even that plan was foiled.

The Federacy's western front saw through what should have been a perfect surprise attack, and the three countries successfully repelled them. The Gran Mur had been penetrated, but just as Kiriya prepared to assist in the conquest of the Republic, he was counterattacked by the Federacy's cruiser missiles and took severe damage. The fact that they'd seen through his position meant his consciousness couldn't be transferred to this spare unit, and he'd been forced to tow his damaged body along for a month.

All because this hostile element, with its ability to track their condition, was present within the Federacy.

<Pale Rider to No Face. Request deemed unnecessary. Báleygr has been irrefutably destroyed.>
<...Acknowledged, No Face. Withdraw from firing position immediately and return to assigned sector.>

<Acknowledged.>

His gaze suddenly fell on what remained of the metal pylon he was leaning against. The sturdy pylon was snapped at its base under his weight of over one thousand tons, its remains lying on the ground beneath him.

Kiri.

The now-distant voice of his young mistress surfaced in his mind. He could no longer recall the face of his one and only empress. She would cry when her handkerchief would get caught in the courtyard's trees, badger him about wanting to see the bird nests resting on their branches, and sneak past the watchful eyes of her attendants to climb the tree, only for her dress to get snagged by the twigs, leaving her stuck up there. Every time, climbing to get her down was his duty.

But he would never do so again.

Not with this mechanical body.

Not in this world without her.

As he turned around to leave, he stopped and turned his back to his former homeland.

He had to hurry and raze this accursed world once and for all...

†

“Ah...”

They were all speechless for a moment.

“Impact detected near the Kreutzbeck City terminal! It’s presumed to be a bombardment by the Morpho...!”

An uproar that bordered on a scream dominated the information center.

“Impossible!”

“It shouldn’t have been repaired yet! How did it fire?!”

“...No...”

Everyone’s eyes gathered on the chief of staff, who whispered suddenly. He spoke, his sharp chin propped on his arms and his gaze fixed on the main screen, which was currently covered with alert messages.

“If it wasn’t *repaired*, but *exchanged*... If they prepared a spare unit from the very beginning, it’s possible. Given its size, transferring its core to a spare unit would be faster than exchanging its damaged parts one by one.”

One would have to disregard the tremendous cost it would take to manufacture two railguns and two railway guns. But the Legion weren’t human, and weighed against their prime directive to eliminate their enemy, this was a trifling matter.

“How absurd can these scrap-metal bastards get...?!”

“What’s the Nordlicht squadron’s status?”

“Unknown. The United Kingdom’s observation drones were all destroyed in the bombardment just now.”

Observational data from Kreutzbeck City’s vicinity arrived in delay, rife with noise and peppered with SIGNAL LOST notifications.

"We have to deploy the cruiser missiles—"

"There's no point."

Everyone's eyes converged on Ernst.

"Where are we supposed to fire the missiles? Do we even know what position the Morpho fired from?"

The officers who realized the reason behind that question grimaced. When the bases were attacked, surrounding radar sites perceived the bombardments' trajectories and calculated them backward to discern the firing position. But this bombardment was in the middle of enemy territory, and there were no radar sites nearby. They didn't know the enemy's position, so counterattacking was pointless.

"B-but, Your Excellency, the enemy is a railway gunner! If we destroy its rails, we'll at least be able to restrict its movements—"

"But it'll still be capable of shooting down the majority of the bases on the western front, won't it? And besides, those are just rails; they'd be repaired in no time. There's no point in firing the missiles."

"But now that the Nordlicht squadron failed, we don't have any other plans! The entire western front's exposed right now; we have to break this deadlock somehow...!"

"What would enduring a bit longer this time give us? What will we do, send another unit at it? This time without any chance of opening a way back for them?"

"Tch..."

The handful of cruiser missiles they'd scraped together was meant as both a fail-safe in case the operation fell through and a way out for the strike force in case the Federacy's army failed to reach Kreutzbeck City. So that even if they didn't get there in time to help the strike force, they could at least whittle down the number of Legion standing in their escape route. To at least not tell these child soldiers they'd sent to their deaths that they weren't allowed to return...

Looking around the information center, Ernst smiled.

"Did you think I would allow you to do something as shameful as abandoning soldiers we've sent out to enemy territory and trash our plan just for fear of your own lives? That I, the Federacy's stand-in president and supreme commander of its military, would allow that? That doesn't coincide with the Federacy's ideals. And if we can't protect and abide by that, we may as well be destroyed here and now."

Silence settled over the information center. The president's words rang true. Yes, those were the ideals a person should live by. Justice at its finest. But sticking by them...to execute the orders as they were was far too...

The firedrake smiled, seated on the commander's seat. This irrational monster, capable of trampling human life in the name of those slogans, of ideals that should be nothing but lip service, laughed as it made a show of the madness inhabiting it.

"That's your responsibility, since you're the ones who chose me as your president time and again. If you say we have no other way but to go against humane values...you will have to die, embracing my ideals."

The intercom's message notification rang out. The chief of staff took the call in place of the communications personnel, who sat there stupefied.

"...Looks like we won't have to do that after all. We just got a report from the 1,028th control room. All of the Nordlicht squadron's units are intact. They're proceeding with the Morpho's elimination operation."

†

The warning arriving just barely on time, them being in the city center, and there being plenty of relatively sturdy buildings to shield the Juggernauts were all deciding factors in their survival. The shock waves still sent Undertaker flying and landing on its back. Shin shook his head dizzily as he got the unit to its feet. He was in the ruins of the city, with the white of concrete filling his field of vision; the buildings caved in, and the pavement was blown to pieces.

Having been exposed to concentrated fire, the old high-speed-railway terminal was quite literally gone without a trace. A piece of metallic wreckage lay at the corner of the crater, spouting silver micromachine blood.

A decoy...

And it wasn't one of the Legion's stupid wooden dolls, either. Using their advanced artificial intelligence and learning capabilities, they constantly adapted to humankind's weaponry and tactics. And then there were the Shepherds, who carried copies of undamaged human brain structures and possessed an intelligence and knowledge equal to what they'd had when they were still alive.

Still, this was the first time Shin's ability to hear the ghosts' voices was used against him like this.

Shin narrowed his eyes, glaring at the massive shadow that had just bombarded them from atop the pylon.

"What the hell is that buggy bastard...?!"

"If anything, it's a centipede. It's got long legs, and they're kind of wiggly."

"I don't care what it is... It's creepy."

Yes, it did resemble some carnivorous arthropod. It had a black, serpentine frame. Its countless segmented legs were now folded into its torso. The barrel of its staggeringly large 800 mm caliber turret was long, so as to grant its shells their initial velocity of eight thousand meters per second. It had the disgusting, eerie artificiality of a slaughter bug driven not by intelligence or will, but by murderous instinct alone. The physical manifestation of the cruel heartlessness inherent to artillery—the weapon that claimed the greatest number of lives despite never bearing witness to anyone's death.

Under the silver-stained sky, beneath the darkened dawn's light, this ebony giant towered over the ruins. The unrealistic, foreign majesty of its single blue eye truly did invoke the image of an evil dragon capable of challenging the gods.

The blue optical sensor scanned over the ruins slowly, seeming not to notice them as they hid between the buildings. It haughtily surveyed the destruction it wrought, confident that it had annihilated its targets.

"...All units."

All fifteen squad members were still connected to the Para-RAID. Some units had taken damage from the scattered shards of rock and the shock waves, but no one had died. All were still capable of fighting.

"Change of target. Direction 280, distance 5,000. High-explosive anti-tank warheads—fire."

At that moment, a line of fire concentrated on the Morpho from between the buildings tilting toward the crater's bedrock. Ignoring all rules of artillery theory that dictated one must move after firing to avoid counterattack, the Morpho remained seated on its throne atop the pylon as the 88 mm rounds blanketed it. They were slower than high-speed anti-tank rounds but still achieved a speed several times faster than the speed of sound—it took the HEATs only mere seconds to traverse the five kilometers to their target.

Something lit up on the Morpho's rear, and simultaneously its close-range defense systems kicked into action, its machine guns roaring as they mowed down the 88 mm rounds. Anju fired her missiles a moment later, but the Morpho calmly allowed its upper armor to absorb the blast of their smaller bombs, without a single one penetrating it...

Shin calmly noted to himself that it was tougher than he'd thought as he squeezed the trigger. The rest of the squad slowly closed in on its front, from the brink of the city ruins. Using the smoke screen generated from the HEATs and the anti-tank rounds, more high-speed piercing rounds soared through the sky, impacting near the base of the Morpho's turret. As the flames of the explosion blinded its sensors, the massive dragon seemed to stagger back lightly.

"...Too shallow."

It still wasn't enough to penetrate its armor. Most of a high-speed armor-piercing round's power stemmed from its velocity, so the closer it fired from, the greater its penetrating power became. That was why they drew closer to it, but even this distance wasn't enough. And if they moved in any closer, there wouldn't be any cover to shield them from its line of fire. Shin's eyes sharpened as he wondered how to diminish the distance any farther.

†

...?!

Just as he thought he had shrugged off the peashooter rounds the surviving insects pelted him with, the sudden impact rattled Kiriya's body, startling him. He swerved his optical sensor, his gaze landing on a pearly-white shadow approaching him with surprising speed. The blurry shadow of a pure-white, four-legged, headless skeletal spider, creeping in search of its lost head, bearing an 88 mm cannon on its back.

Both of its grappling arms were equipped with high-frequency blades. Even Kiriya realized how unusual of a weapon that was for a Feldreß. On a battlefield where firearms reigned supreme, brandishing a sword and wielding close-range equipment bordered on suicidal madness.

It was Báleygr, the special hostile element with the ability to observe all of the Legion's movements.

And when he saw its personal mark, Kiriya felt his nonexistent breath catch in the throat he didn't have. A headless skeleton carrying a shovel. A headless skeletal knight was the crest of the Nouzen line's founder. And the family head had once sent the picture book themed after his story...to his grandchildren, born in the Republic.

It can't be.

Is he...?

Ah.

A dark elation the likes of which he never knew surged up from within Kiriya.

He was alive... No...

He had somehow survived in that state.

A communication arrived from the Supreme Commander unit.

<No Face to Pale Rider. Entrust handling of the enemy unit to your assigned forces and retreat immediately.>

Kiriya was filled with disappointment at this hindering order.

What is he saying...?!

<Pale Rider to No Face. Cannot comply with given order. Hostile element must be dealt with immediately.>

<No Face to Pale Rider. I repeat. Entrust handling of the enemy unit to your assigned forces and retreat immediately. Your presence in this combat sector cannot be approved.>

How stupid...!

But contrary to Kiriya's flaring anger, order-violation warning alerts flickered in his liquid micromachine mind. The programming hardwired into him strictly prohibited him from arguing any further. Even Shepherds, who carried the minds and personalities of the war victims, couldn't refuse an order from a Superior Commander unit.

<At your current relative distance to them, you are at a disadvantage against their tank turrets: their main armament. In addition, *with your current equipment, there is a high probability you will kill Báleygr*. Due to the aforementioned reasons, further combat in this area cannot be approved.>

<...>

<Return to appointed sector is mandatory. Fall back and attack the designated sector.>

<.....Acknowledged.>

His Legion instincts forbade him from giving any other response. But... even that may have been a good omen for his desire to burn the world to the ground. He spared a final glance toward the rubble, to his kin whose face he never knew. He had lost his homeland, had it steal away his family, and yet he lived on, pathetically.

Even though you're the same.

The same as me. Even though you have nowhere to go but to the field of battle.

...I'll show you.

Unwinding his body, he leaped off the pylon. Landing on the rails, which creaked under his massive weight, he paid one final glance to his kin, whose face and name he had never known in his lifetime.

Come after me.

I'll burn it all to the ground. The comrades who follow you, the land you mean to return to, everything that makes you human.

Let your solitude consume you.

†

It turned a glance toward him, and Shin, his senses sharpened from the adrenaline, could feel the cold smile contained in that gesture.

Come after me.

Tearing its gaze from him, the Morpho writhed its many segmented legs and drove its massive form forward with the sudden acceleration unique to the Legion. The bizarre metallic sounds of its segmented legs moving along the eight-track railway spread out like the patterning of rain, and it rapidly widened the distance from Shin, quickly gaining the speed of a falcon pursuing its prey. Moving at a speed unmatched even by the Löwe and the Dinosauria, like the high-speed train itself, the sinister shadow slithered away from the city ruins.

You're not getting away.

But at the moment he narrowed his eyes and prepared to push down the control sticks...

“—Shin!”

...Raiden's voice burst in, bringing him to his senses as if his consciousness had been yanked back by the collar. The noises that had disappeared suddenly returned to him. The Legion's moans and lamentations. The growling of his Juggernaut's power pack and actuator. The reports and instructions exchanged by his squad mates over the Sensory Resonance. The familiar tumult of the battlefield.

The guarding Legion forces who scattered off to avoid the Morpho's bombardment returned, and Shin could hear the voices of the other Legion nearby beginning to approach the area as well. He suddenly realized that if they didn't respond somehow, they'd be surrounded.

"What do we do? Do we go after it?"

The Nordlicht squadron's specified objective was to eliminate the Morpho occupying Kreutzbeck City. Neither the squadron nor the western front's army predicted they would have to advance any deeper into Legion territory.

"...Yeah, we keep going."

"What, are you insane?!"

Raiden nodded silently, but in his stead, Bernholdt—Shin's aide and the most senior sergeant in the squad—cut into Shin's words, abiding by his role and position.

"The operation's objective is eliminating the Morpho, not to suppress this city."

A momentary silence fell between them, disturbed only by the sound of Bernholdt punching his console, which Shin heard through the Resonance.

"God dammit! Everyone's been holding out because they were expecting the main force to arrive! Why are you Eighty-Six so keen on throwing your damn lives away for a country that isn't even your homeland?!"

That wasn't really it. They weren't doing it for this country or for its army.

The only reason we fight...is for ourselves.

"Fucking hell, the moment I started working under you is the moment I ran out of luck! Talk about pulling the short straw... All right, boys, all units, turn around!"

Under Bernholdt's order, the mercenaries turned their ten units' course, facing the direction the ghosts' voices were approaching from straight on.

"Rejoice, boys! The hell you all love so much is headed our way!"

Even the Eighty-Six, who made the battlefield their home just like the Vargus did, had trouble understanding this roundabout method of encouragement. It was equal parts despair, but their war cries did indeed echo loudly as they disappeared beyond the high-rises.

Bernholdt's unit alone stayed behind, its optical sensor turned their way.

"We'll take over here. You guys go on ahead! It pisses me off to admit it, but we can't keep up with your crazy mobility."

The majority may have been in their late teens, just like the Eighty-Six. They may have had ten more years of military experience, but the mercenaries spent most of their service piloting heavily armored Vánagandrs. They lacked the experience in high-speed battle and intuition the Eighty-Six had gained from overusing an ultra-light Feldreß.

"I'd rather die than end up slowing a bunch of brats down... Good luck out there!"

CHAPTER 8

RUN THROUGH THE BATTLEFRONT

“—Let’s begin by explaining our current status.”

The first voice that connected to the Resonance after seven hours of silence was one of a young man Shin had never heard before.

“The recapturing of the Highway Corridor by the three countries’ armies is at present nearly complete. It’ll take some time for us to have it under our complete control, and the United Kingdom’s army’s advance is a bit behind schedule, but, well, it’s all within permissible range.”

Sitting within Undertaker’s cockpit as it lay in hiding, avoiding the gaze of the Ameise, Shin didn’t so much as acknowledge he was listening. The patrol unit wasn’t so close by that it could pick up the sound of him talking in the cockpit, but they weren’t far enough away to allow for any distractions, either.

Perhaps taking the situation into consideration, the person on the other side of the Resonance—apparently, the western front’s chief of staff—didn’t fault Shin or cite it as an act of disrespect. This was, after all, a company officer ignoring the words of a commanding officer.

“This operation’s secondary objective is therefore accomplished... However, our primary objective of eliminating the Morpho is, sadly, not yet complete. Oh, the fact that we didn’t consider the existence of a second unit was a blunder on the general staff headquarters’ side. You guys on the field aren’t seen as responsible for it.”

An apathetic silence was exchanged between his comrades, who weren’t participating in the conversation but were connected to the Resonance. No one cared about that anyway.

“If we fail in eliminating the Morpho, this entire operation will have been for nothing. As such, all forces will continue their offensive. We will limit our sphere of suppression to the areas surrounding the old high-speed-railway tracks and gradually narrow down the range as we march in pursuit of the Morpho.”

Shin intersected the web of the old high-speed-railway tracks over his map of the area, confirming the route the main force would take as the chief of staff was describing it. They were to advance 150 kilometers south along the old Empire’s border and would then turn east at the fork in the road.

“You are presently seventy kilometers west of the western army’s main force. The cruise speed of a small unit like you and the corps-size main force is entirely different. That distance will probably only grow from here on out, so I want to confirm this one more time. Are you sure you want to continue pursuing the Morpho?”

“...This mission never had any support or reinforcements to begin with. Nothing’s changed.”

“But one thing will change, and that’s the amount of time it’ll take you to regroup with the main force. I’ll be frank. We can’t guarantee the main force will reach your destination or that you’ll survive until it gets there.”

Shin sighed lightly. What was the point of saying it this late in the game? That had been perfectly clear to them since the beginning.

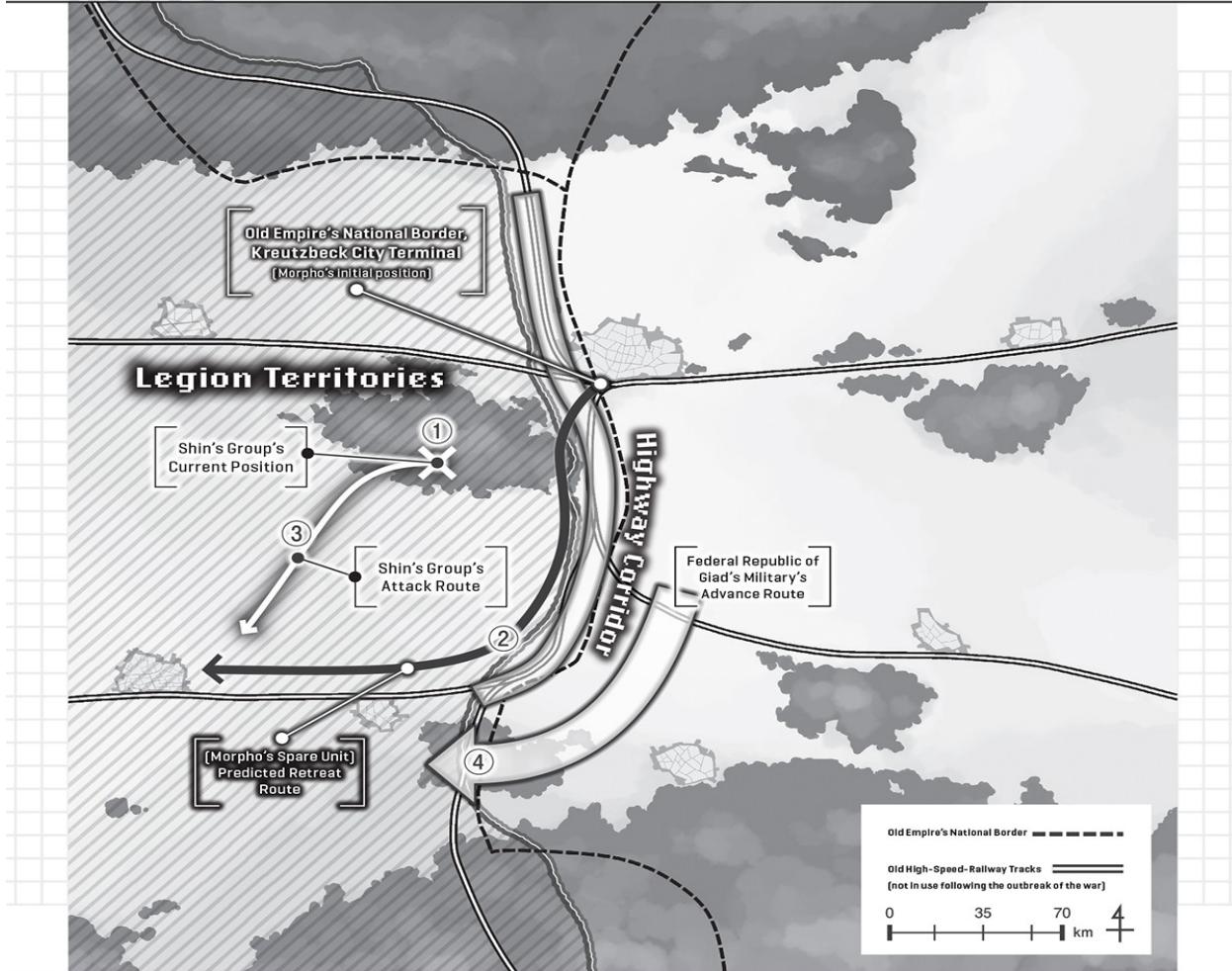
“But we don’t have any other way of doing this, do we?”

The chief of staff seemed to smile bitterly.

“Saying that leaves us in a bind, you see... Someone has to do it, and even though you said you were up for it, it wouldn’t be fair to not give you the option to back down once the situation’s changed. What I’m trying to say is you can fall back if you’ve changed your minds.”

“That must be a joke. If we waste time falling back, the Morpho will just retreat that much deeper into the Legion’s territories. It would just make eliminating it that much harder.”

MAP Second Assault Operation Overview



Perhaps owing to the enemy forces being exhausted from the last large-scale offensive, we have made unprecedented strides into the Legion's territories despite incurring many losses ourselves. However, we've failed in fulfilling the crucial objective of this operation: eliminating the Morpho. As such, we will now outline a second offensive, which will be pivotal to our success.

Current situation: First Lieutenant Shinei Nouzen and his subordinates are on standby in a forest southwest of old Kreutzbeck City (point 1), with the Federacy military's main force roughly seventy kilometers behind them. The secondary objective of the operation—securing the Highway Corridor—is effectively accomplished, and the main force is currently solidifying its control over the position. According to the First Lieutenant's ability, it is presumed the Morpho is advancing south along the old railway tracks (point 2).

Operation outline: First Lieutenant Nouzen and his subordinates will make use of his ability and the Reginleif's mobility to avoid the enemy forces as they move, and they will resume pursuit of the Morpho (point 3). Each country's forces remaining in the Highway Corridor will resume combat to distract the enemy's sights from the strike force as much as possible. Concurrently, the Federacy's main force will narrow its charge to the area around the high-speed-railway tracks to secure the strike force's path of retreat (point 4).

Failure to eliminate the Morpho will expose the families, friends, and comrades left behind in our country to enemy fire. If we do not stop it, there will be no future for us. We expect 110 percent from each and every one of you.

Shin felt the presence of the chief of staff's smile deepen.

"...If you fall back and retreat, the difficulty of the mission wouldn't matter to you anymore, would it?"

"Given we'd eventually get killed anyway if the Morpho isn't dealt with, it's all the same to us. What's the point of running away today if we'll just end up dying tomorrow?"

"Is that so...? Well, that's all we had to report. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

†

Having taken over the surface allowed the Federacy to deploy antiair guns and burn down the Eintagsfliege, which meant aircrafts could be flown to the vicinity of the front lines.

"Good lord, those kids are dark. Or maybe inflexible would be the right way to put it. I feel bad for them, but at this rate, they'll die in battle sooner or later."

The chief of staff scoffed shortly, handing his RAID Device to a nearby aide. Believing that seeing the situation with his own eyes would be more reliable than relying on reports, he'd come to the front lines, which were currently bustling with preparations and reorganizations for their resumed progress.

Somehow, they'd finally arrived here, a small hill with a perfect, unobstructed view of old Kreutzbeck City. The place was still full of survivors who chose to remain on the front lines, newly arrived reinforcements, and also the injured and deceased who would be sent back to the rear. The sound of soldiers in charge of supply and reorganization intermingled with the roaring engines of trucks loaded with body bags. Near a smoking, crashed Vánagandr, combat trucks filled to the brim with armored infantry and stretchers loaded with the injured passed one another by.

He squinted his eyes at the empty lot, which was all that remained of Kreutzbeck's urban area in the wake of the Morpho's rampage, pretending not to notice how the armored infantry soldiers stiffened with fatigue when they realized there was a high-ranking officer in their midst.

Looking over the battered ruins of a Reginleif, he found Grethe, who sat in its cockpit grimacing, nearly unharmed in contrast to her machine.

Yes, nearly unharmed. They were prepared to accept that she'd died once they lost the Nachzehrer's signal, but to their surprise, she was fine. The chief of staff considered keeping that fact hidden from the major general, who, despite appearances, was beside himself with concern for her.

"Exactly who is going to die sooner or later exactly, Willem...? I'm sure the mixed-blood, Republic-born first lieutenant is quite an eyesore for a former noble, a pureblood Onyx like you, but come now."

"I'm not that narrow-minded, Grethe. Those of mixed blood have their own grace and appeal. A once-in-a-generation, grotesque beauty."

The chief of staff's lips curled up in a smile.

"...He wasn't worried for you. Seems to me you didn't do a very good job of taming him."

"Of course he wasn't. If I had to have a boy that's a decade younger worry for me, then never mind the Legion. The shame would kill me."

And besides, that was something the Reginleif's murderous mobility—the fact that they were true to Grethe's vision and requirements—granted them.

"I see your skills haven't diminished one bit, Spider Woman... The Legion-slaying Black Widow, was it?"

A crease formed over the bridge of Grethe's nose.

"Cut that out, Killer Mantis. You know how I got that nickname, after all."

The chief of staff let out a lighthearted chuckle.

"Of course I do. I was the one who made it up, by the way. Brides who have to put on mourning dresses before they even have the chance to wear their wedding dress are rare."

"You piece of shit."

He extended a hand to Grethe as she swore at him, and he helped her down from the Reginleif. Ten of her subordinates—the beastmen of the Vargus—were climbing up the hill. Exchanging a glance with the young sergeant looking up at them, Grethe shrugged.

"I did it out of respect for the idiot who died, leaving behind the woman who turned me down a month before she became his bride. Especially when the major general and I were getting ready to pick on both of you by covering the church with roses, you know?"

"..."

Out of anger for said idiot, they instead stuffed his coffin—which didn't even contain his remains, for there was nothing left to collect—full of the damn petals.

"...I feel nothing for that monster. But I hate the idea of seeing you cry again because of him. So in that regard, I don't particularly want him to die in battle."

†

They hid their Juggernauts in the tall underbrush of a deserted evergreen oak forest, where they apparently avoided the Ameise's detection. The faint footsteps of the patrol unit and their moans of suffering gradually faded, and Shin released his stilled breath. Seeing that, Raiden, docking inside Wehrwolf a short distance away, asked him:

"They gone?"

"Yeah. But let's wait a while longer just to be on the safe side... Let's take a break while we're on standby."

His words made the suspense on the other side of the Resonance loosen a bit. He could feel some of them stretching. The Reginleif's cockpit may have been preferable to that of the claustrophobic Republic Juggernaut, but it still had comfort and survivability as its lowest priority. In order to minimize the projected area in the machine's front, a Feldreß's cockpit was cramped, not taking the stress of its pilots into account.

Climbing out of the cockpit, they found that the sun, which hadn't even risen when the operation began, was now almost at its zenith, with sunlight filtering through oak leaves, softly illuminating the shade of the trees. Rays of sunlight intersected, painting an uneven circle over where the five Juggernauts were—accompanied by Fido, which followed after them.

Now, then.

All their gazes gathered on Fido... Or rather, on the container it was towing. Before they'd deployed, they'd been so caught up with briefing and checking their rigs that they hadn't had the chance to check it. And sure enough, they hadn't seen her that morning. Feeling everyone's glare on it, Fido beeped a feeble "*Pi*" and stirred with guilt. The container lacked windows, and yet someone inside felt their gazes and reacted in a panic.

"*M-meow... Meow...*"

"""Are you a moron?!""""

Everyone but Shin simultaneously quipped back (though Anju had said "Are you an idiot?!" instead), albeit in hushed tones, as they were still in enemy territory. Ignoring the clichéd, over-the-top reactions, Shin spoke.

"Fido."

"*Pi.*"

Swiveling its optical sensor aside in a needless display of shame, Fido kicked its front legs against the ground.

"Open the container. That's an order."

"...*Pi.*"

"*You mustn't, Fido, do not open... Ah—*"

At the back of the opened container, sitting in a squat between a fixed magazine of 88 mm shells and an energy pack, was Frederica. Before she could even say anything, Theo reached into the container and grabbed her by the back of her collar and pulled her out as if she were an unruly cat.

"What are you doing here...?!"

"Aaah...?!"

Frederica flinched at the sound of his voice.

They may have suppressed their voices, but it was a shout of honest rage.



"Don't you know we might not be able to come back?! Why did you follow us here?! If anything happens, you'll just end up dying with us!"

For a moment, Frederica's crimson eyes flashed to life.

"It is that very attitude that unnerves me, you bumbling fools!"

Taken by surprise, Theo fell silent. Realizing the danger raising her voice could bring, Frederica covered her mouth with both hands. She looked up nervously, and Shin shook his head. The Ameise had gotten some distance away from them, and with the dense foliage mostly dispersing her voice, it seemed they hadn't heard her. They may have been pretending, but there weren't movements in their main force, either.

"Good grief, what do you mean by 'might not be able to come back'? Do away with that kind of resolve, I say. How long do you intend to hold on to that willingness to die at any time? How long do you intend to remain trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector? Ernst ordered you to return at all costs, did he not...? That is the fate you've been entrusted with."

And so, raising her slender, delicate shoulders, she continued.

"I am a hostage, meant to ensure that you do not run away. Not from the battlefield, but from your mission to return alive... You do not wish for frail, innocent little me to be involved, correct?"

With her face still somewhat pale, her lips alone curled into a smile. Returning her glance, Shin sighed.

"Raiden, if I told you to take her back..."

"Don't ask me for the fuckin' moon, man. The only one who could possibly pull that off is you."

It was like Raiden said. They were seventy kilometers away from the main force and heading east; avoiding the Legion was impossible unless one could tell exactly where they were.

"But we ain't got a choice. Fine, she can stay in my rig... 'Sides, no one but me can carry her."

The Juggernaut's movements were already fast to the point of damaging the human body, and Frederica wouldn't be able to withstand riding with vanguards like Shin and Theo and their crazy stunts. A sniper like Kurena couldn't afford to have her concentration interrupted, and that held true for Anju as well, who specialized in one-against-many combat. Having her ride with Fido, which wasn't armored, wasn't acceptable, so by process of elimination, only Raiden was left to carry her.

"Forgive me."

"Don't pull this crap on us again... Even without you doing this, we weren't marching to our deaths."

"...I understand."

Sensing her red eyes turn to him, Shin looked down at her lowered head and said:

"Frederica."

She raised her head, and he tossed something haphazardly in her direction. Catching it in surprise, Frederica then widened her eyes when she saw what she was holding.

An automatic pistol.

It was the old type used in the Republic, larger than the Federacy's standard model.

"You know how to use it, right? If we get wiped out, or you can't link up with the main force, use it to end yourself. The Legion don't toy with their prey, but they don't finish off those who failed, either."

He'd seen comrades who were beyond salvation but couldn't die begging to be finished off more times than he cared to count. And it was this very pistol that put an end to their lives. He had no attachment to his old rig or his Republic uniform, but this pistol was the one thing he refused to part with.

"Are you certain...? This is the pistol you used to deliver the final blow to Eugene and your other comrades."

"...Didn't I tell you to close your eyes?"

"Fool. It was your memories that I saw. It's because you intend to carry everyone with you that..."

Stopping herself from uttering the very end of that sentence, Frederica embraced the pistol.

"I will gladly hang on to it, then... But my small hands cannot handle such a heavy device. I shall force it back into your hands once we return to base... So we must return together."

It was getting late, and they were unable to move with the patrol unit still skulking about in the vicinity, so they decided to use this time to have an early lunch. They began setting up a small camp, with the exception of Frederica, who didn't have the first clue about what to do when it came to camping. They couldn't afford to start a campfire, so they made do with combat rations, which came as part of the Federacy's standard gear. The rations were filled with packaged, sterilized food and, out of consideration for situations where fire wasn't an option, came in laminated, water-based self-heating packets.

As they took the laminated packs, which were emblazoned with the Federacy's symbol of the two-headed eagle and an explanation of how to use them, out of Fido's container and spread them out on the gray, urban camouflaged ground, Shin scoffed.

"I guess they didn't write what's in each pack because they wanted to make the meals even slightly more interesting, but at times like this, it's a little annoying."

"True."

Raiden, standing nearby, nodded in agreement, but Frederica didn't understand what they meant. Combat rations came in twenty-two varieties, and there was no way of knowing what you got until you opened it up. It made opening them up feel kind of like unwrapping a present, which was

probably the intent here. But when she was handed a ration heated up with the flameless ration heater, she finally realized what they meant.

"It's pretty hot, so be careful you don't get burned."

"Hmm."

It seemed the Eintagsfliege and the Rabe weren't deployed above them. There was no telling how long their trip would take this time, so Fido found a spot with some good sunshine and spread out its solar panels as the group opened their packs.

The laminated packs were to be carried in crates and airdropped, so they were particularly sturdy, but everything besides the external packaging could be opened by hand. After opening her package, Frederica held her breath. The scent of burnt meat leaked out of a hole in the package.

She'd spent half the day in Fido's container. It wasn't pressurized, since it sat in the Nachzehrer, which specialized in low-altitude flight, and didn't have nuclear or biochemical precautions in place, since a container was never meant to ferry people. As such, for the time she was in there, the scents of the battlefield infiltrated it freely—including the smell of smoke and melted steel, of the heat of bombshells and...the scent of burnt human flesh, which the smell emanating from the pack made her recall in vivid detail.

Shin, who'd assumed this might happen, noticed Frederica cover her mouth with her hands and posed a question to the other four.

"Does anyone have a pack that doesn't contain meat?"

"Oh, I got trout. Let's trade, Frederica."

Kurena snatched the pack from the girl's hands, depositing her own ration in Frederica's arms instead. The characteristic smell of animal meat faded away, and Frederica exhaled in relief. Theo then said, dipping the included spoon into the country-style stew in his pack:

"It kinda goes without saying, but these things weren't made assuming a kid would eat them. The portions are pretty big, so eat up as much as you want."

"Aye. But..."

The memory of the smell of charred meat still remained in her nostrils. Stabbing her plastic fork into the brittle, pale fish meat that had the certain blandness that packaged foods often had, Frederica finally said:

"I'm surprised you can still eat meat..."

She seemed to instantly regret those words, which almost felt like she was criticizing their ability to remain unchanged in the face of the many deaths they'd encountered. Shin and the others didn't seem to mind, though.

"Eh. We're used to it."

"Having to eat after carrying the wounded away wasn't unusual, after all. We don't really mind, and our stomachs growl all the same."

"At first, you don't even want to see meat, but you forget about that after a while."

As they spoke, the five chewed away at their rations with surprising speed, truly not associating the horrors of the battlefield with cooked meat. This was enemy territory, and they didn't have much time to idle around. Steeling her resolve, Frederica concentrated on eating her trout and cream stew. She chewed, then swallowed. Kurena snickered as she watched Frederica's expression stiffen in silent disgust.

"Is it too harsh on your refined palate, princess?"

".....Yes."

There was some effort put into making the rations palatable out of the understanding that the food's taste could affect morale, but in the end, caloric value and shelf life were prioritized above all else, meaning flavor was often sacrificed. The Federacy's combat meals were usually provided by bases' kitchens or kitchen cars sent out to the battlefield, and these rations were only spares usually placed in storage.

They were still tasty enough for the majority of rank-and-file soldiers and noncommissioned and junior officers, but for the last empress and the adopted daughter of the temporary president, it was the furthest cry from the rich cuisine she had grown accustomed to. Sadly, it was only natural, given it was meant for exhausted soldiers on the battlefield, but the seasoning was too thick, and it was so soft that it didn't have a texture to speak of. The unpleasant scent of heated preservatives clung to her nostrils.

"I apologize for having to say this again, but...I'm surprised you can eat this..."

Thankfully, they didn't take it the wrong way and chuckled in response.

"Apparently, it's still a step up from the rations they used to serve. Bernholdt says the old rations felt like they were eating starch."

"It's pretty funny how people always compare bad food to something you'd never eat in a million years."

Like soap, or a sponge, or clay, or a rag used to wipe away spilled milk...

"But starch, you say..."

The Far East apparently had some folk story or myth about how eating the starch of small birds would get one punished by having one's tongue cut off, but that was probably starch made by crushing rice. The starch Bernholdt was talking about was more likely the kind used to make synthetic glue... Not that Frederica had any interest in eating the kind of corn starch that Far Eastern story told about.

"Even that's probably a hundred times better than the trash they gave us in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. You could search the world over, and you'd never find anything nastier."

"What did it taste like?"

At her question, the Eighty-Six all exchanged looks and answered in one voice, including Shin, who'd held his tongue for the majority of the conversation. That made Frederica realize that, yes, it was probably that

bad... If even he, who placed no importance on the flavor of his meals, made an incomprehensibly disgusted expression.

“““Plastic explosives.”””

“...”

Apparently, it wasn't even remotely close to being food.

“It stopped?”

Shin narrowed his eyes in suspicion and whispered it just as they were about to set out. Apparently, the Morpho had stopped moving after advancing far to the east and hadn't budged since.

“Maintenance... They might be changing its gun barrel.”

“Probably.”

Whatever the case, they knew where they had to go now. Their current position was the northwest corner of the old Empire's borders. Taking the shortest route to the Morpho's location in the southwestern sector required them to cut diagonally through the Legion's territories.

Five Juggernauts and one Scavenger rushed onward through the old forest. This afforded them plenty of natural cover, as the Löwe and Dinosauria could not traverse it due to its many intertwining roots and the undergrowth. As decided at noon, Frederica rode inside Wehrwolf. The Juggernaut's cockpit had a collapsible auxiliary seat to transport and fix wounded soldiers onto, but it was made for emergencies and wasn't meant to be in use for prolonged periods of time; in other words, it was extremely hard and small.

As such, Frederica got up from it soon enough and was currently sitting obediently on Raiden's lap. According to Shin's estimate, there shouldn't be any fighting in the immediate future, and with Raiden's height, she wasn't getting in his way, so he let her do as she wished... Though, if the others were to see this, they likely wouldn't stop teasing him about it for the rest of his life. Thank God real life wasn't anything like the giant-robot cartoons he'd watched as a kid, and there were no holo-windows that let them see each other's cockpits in real time, he thought with a sigh.

“Once the fighting starts, go back to the auxiliary seat. And don't say a word. You'll bite your tongue.”

“I know. Do not treat me like an infant.”

But as she said that, she kept getting distracted by the outside view of the optical screens, getting excited just as a child would. She may have tried to hide it, but her eyes were glittering with curiosity and excitement.

“Oh, those were deer! Raiden, there are deer over there!”

“Yep...”

Glancing to the side, he spotted two deer in the distance, their black eyes locked onto the unusual intruders in their midst. One had no horns—presumably a mother doe—and the other was a slender, delicate fawn. Realizing that his feelings about how tasty they looked probably wouldn't go over well, Raiden kept those thoughts to himself.

Raiden had seen so many dark forests in the Eighty-Sixth Sector that were virtually free of human influence that he had already grown tired of them. But for Frederica, it was a different story entirely. All she knew was the Empire's final fortress, the city of Sankt Jeder, and the advance bases and their surroundings... So for her, these sights were all new.

And that in and of itself wasn't a feeling Raiden was unfamiliar with. It was nearly a year ago, sometime last fall, when they were first sent on their Special Reconnaissance mission. They saw so many new sights back then... Seeing something you've never known of before with your own two eyes is truly something special.

That held true even for Raiden, who'd been kept in the eighty-five Sectors for five years and had the unusual chance to watch television. He could only imagine what it was like for his comrades who'd been thrown to the Eighty-Sixth Sector ten years ago and knew only the battlefield and concentration camps.

When was it again? They'd stopped at some old, abandoned city somewhere. There hadn't been a single cloud out that day, and the sunset had filled the sky. The ruins had shone in the light of dusk, which washed over the townscape made entirely out of white stone and reflected on the rows of maidenhair trees with their fallen, autumn-colored leaves, resulting in a golden glow.

Kurena had frolicked through the ruins happily, tripping over the fallen leaves and tumbling down spectacularly. Shin had broken out laughing when he saw her, and her eyes had instantly gone red.

Right... Back then. He laughed. So when had it become like this...?

He then noticed Frederica was looking up at him with her big red eyes.

"Raiden... You truly are Shinei's best friend."

"Like hell I am. We just can't get rid of each other."

Her overly direct assertion was a statement he would never admit, which made him deny it almost reflexively, but Frederica's earnest eyes didn't waver.

"...You mean since the battle earlier."

"No, I mean since the large-scale offensive."

Raiden scoffed. That wasn't the first time she'd mentioned this.

"None of us had any idea what was going on back then during the large-scale offensive, to be honest... There were so many enemies back then, I thought he'd just lost track of what was around him."

The enemies would come time and again no matter how many they shot down. The screeches and lamentations of the ghosts were endless.

"It was that kind of messed-up situation... Why'd you even Resonate back then?"

They strictly forbade her from Resonating with them before they went on the offensive because they couldn't allow for any distraction when things were that bad. And they didn't want her to hear anyone die, not to mention

that the sheer magnitude of the ghosts' shrieks made even Shin go pale. And he wouldn't want to see young Frederica's heart break.

"The Republic... The Gran Mur collapsed. So I wanted to inform you..."

"..."

The moron knew and kept it bottled up, didn't he? Raiden thought bitterly. Shin could discern the movements of the Legion, even from far away, so there was no way he wouldn't know if the Republic was destroyed. And while Shin didn't care for the indulgent white pigs slacking off in the Republic...

We're off, Major.

He did care about their final Handler to an unusual extent.

Frederica curled up her body, hugging her shoulders with her slim hands as if a chill had run through her.

"But he would not answer me. At that time, Shinei was... He was the same as Kiriya at the end of his days."

That was a worse answer than Raiden had anticipated.

"...That bad, huh?"

"He was incapable of seeing anything. Nothing but the enemy before his eyes. It was the same as when you were fighting earlier... No, it has become more severe since the large-scale offensive..."

"Yeah, it was the first time he lost sight of the fact that we were even there."

No—there was one other time that had happened. It was back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, during their final battle in the first ward, when they faced off against the lost head Shin had been seeking for five years: the ghost of his brother. He'd said he would do it on his own, and he'd forgotten they were there...

...So that's what this is.

"Frederica, if...if you were told to go back and leave this moron behind, would you stay here anyway?"

Her crimson gaze didn't waver in the slightest as she nodded.

†

"Looks like they've decided to set out again."

The interior of the armored control vehicle, which seemed too boorish to be used by royalty, was dark, with the silhouette of the figure sinking their back to the command seat's backrest and the girl kneeling at his side barely being visible from outside. The crown prince spoke, standing at the vehicle's door, dressed in the United Kingdom military's long-collared uniform.

"The Federacy Esper leading the pursuit after the Morpho reports that the dragon seems to have stopped at the southern territories, atop Eaglebloom. The Federacy military and the Alliance's army have begun advancing, gradually gaining control of the route. Our military's working

with another detachment of the Republic's forces to suppress the northern side of Eaglebloom."

As the figure inside the vehicle rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, the girl sitting inside kept her gaze locked onto him, her green, catlike eyes sparkling in the darkness.

"I'm going to need you to do one more job... Do you have enough spares to compensate for what you lost?"

"I've ordered the rear to send whatever they can our way ahead of time, brother Zephyr. It'll take a corps-size force until evening to prepare to march again, so we should be finished with our preparations by then."

The crown prince smiled elegantly at such a wise response and nodded.

"It seems the plan is to use our army as a diversion to support the march, but even still, if the Federacy's main force goes south, the Legion are bound to notice... Do we have a countermeasure for that?"

"It seems the Alliance military is planning on bringing out an anti-radar weapon they're developing. It forms clouds of metal-foil particles that blind the Rabe and the Ameise and disrupt the Legion's communications. It only works for a short period of time, and its range can only cover the southern territories at most, but if they use it all, it should buy our military the time it needs to make its judgment."

"Once again, that's rather desperate of the Alliance. That weapon of theirs will only be effective against the Legion once, given how quickly those mechanical monsters are able to adapt."

"It's the natural decision to make, seeing as if we lose here, there won't be a next time."

"By your will, brother Zephyr... Nevertheless—"

Finally correcting his dishonorable act of not looking at his brother and of covering his eyes—who was his superior both in inheritance of the throne and in military rank—the figure turned his gaze toward the crown prince.

"They sent out child soldiers on a suicide mission aboard a prototype aircraft that can't fly on its own... They condemn the Republic's manned drone but don't seem to care for appearances, either."

"Your little songbirds are just as abominable as that... Things are only going to get tougher from here on out. Think of a countermeasure for that, too."

"By your will."

†

A group of planes soared through the red southern sky, leaving white trails in their wake. These were remote-controlled, small UAVs. Moving faster than the Stachelschwein could respond, they self-destructed in midair, scattering a mass of tiny metal-foil particles that reflected that day's final rays of sunlight, overlapping and forming obstructive black clouds.

A second wave of UAVs rushed in and self-destructed as well, followed by a third and later a fourth that was exposed to antiair fire. Clouds of metal-foil particles spread out, temporarily shutting down the Legion's communication network.

This obstruction didn't affect the Scout types that lay outside its sphere of influence, however. While this attack pattern didn't exist in their data banks, they could estimate its origins, and the mechanical ants ravenously gathered data regarding the cloud and the aircrafts that scattered it, reporting it to the wide area network. Their sensitive sensors couldn't see past the cloud, and all communications with friendly units under its influence were cut off.

In conclusion—this was an anti-radar weapon that cut off and scrambled all light and electromagnetic waves. Blinding the eyes of the enemy was basic procedure taken before marching on their territory. But however obvious these actions were, the Legion strengthened their defenses both around the metal clouds and in other sectors equally.

A while later, the United Kingdom's and the Federacy's armies began their march in another sector to the north. It was a diversion, after all. The commanders of both sectors sent requests for reinforcements.

†

"They're moving. Looks like the diversion to the north worked; they took the bait."

"Two diversions, huh? The guys at the north and south must be getting desperate."

Their camp was the remains of a small village in the forest they traveled through over the course of the day. The rose window of the cathedral standing opposite their position cast an intricate shadow over the plaza where they hid their Juggernauts. Raiden shook his head.

"I guess the main force'll be moving now, too... They'll be getting pretty far from us now."

"They're planning to advance by marching all night long, so I think that'll close some of the distance between us."

"Yeah, figures."

Unlike the main force, which could take advantage of its size and allow its soldiers to rest in shifts, a small unit like theirs had to stop to rest or else they wouldn't last. Their Juggernauts needed servicing after a daylong march. They could last a few days without sleep, but their efficiency in everything they did—combat included—would plummet.

Thankfully, the Morpho seemed to have remained still. That loaned credence to the maintenance theory. It had an 800 mm barrel, so just loading its several tons probably took a colossal amount of effort. Its armor was capable of deflecting even 88 mm shells, so each of its armor modules was exceptionally heavy, and perhaps going into combat immediately after

transferring its central-processor structure diagram impacted its need for repairs, too.

The past residents of this village had abandoned it after it had been attacked by the Legion, or perhaps even much sooner than that, and so its buildings hadn't been damaged by fighting. There might have still been functional hearths or stoves, so the three girls, Frederica included, went through the houses to check their kitchens. Theo visited the residential houses on the hunt for any good rooms they could rest in, and right now, only Raiden and Shin were near the cathedral.

"...Shin."

Shin directed an indifferent glance at Raiden, and before he could reply with an apathetic *what?* Raiden cut in with a remark of his own.

"Take Frederica and go back."

There was a prolonged pause before Shin replied.

"Why?"

"What're you asking me why for? I told you at noon, you're the most suited to do it. You're the only one who can make it back safely with the Legion skulking around."

"But we're in pursuit."

"It stopped moving, and even if it does start moving again, it can only move along the rails, so you can just let us know through the Para-RAID. And thankfully, unlike last time, the others are pulling a huge distraction and drawing the enemy's sights their way."

Shin suddenly scoffed. A smile as sharp as a knife had found its way to his lips.

Yeah, there was that expression again.

That smile that was like a blade. Like madness. Like a warring demon about to walk to his death.

The same smile he'd worn before challenging his brother.

"You think the Legion will actually have their hands full with the main force's diversion? If it comes to a direct confrontation, the Federacy doesn't stand a chance. Crossing through the territories should've been evidence enough of that."

"It's still better than towing you along with us... I knew you were fucked in the head from the get-go, but recently, it's gotten even worse, and that last fight we had settles it."

Fighting like he was walking the razor's edge between life and death, with a savagery that bordered on foolhardiness, was par for the course for Shin. But he had also always maintained a grasp on where the rest of his squad was and had the kind of coolheadedness that let him observe the war situation from a bird's-eye view. So even if Raiden doubted the guy's sanity, he was never worried for him, per se.

But recently, that balance had been steadily falling apart. Shin's constant dance on the razor's edge was as reckless as ever, but the only thing his eyes could see was the enemy standing in his way—the fierce,

arduous unfolding battle against these slaughter machines called the Legion, who were far more specialized and optimized for murder and war than any man.

As if he'd been craving what awaited at the end of that battle.

"You almost got dragged along there... What's gotten into you?"

Was it by the ghost of Frederica's knight, the man he'd never met? Or was it by the madness of war itself?

"...Nothing in particular."

Raiden clicked his tongue. He didn't want to believe it, but...

"You really think I'll believe that, you moron?"

Or maybe Shin really didn't notice what had been wavering unsteadily beneath that stone face of his: the conflicted feelings that had been tormenting him for some time now.

"...What's not to believe?"

"Unfortunately for me, I've known you for a long time. That means I'm able to notice certain things about you, even when you don't notice them yourself."

You can't see the expression on your own face. And you don't have the slightest clue what you look like right now.

"You're wavering like a house on stilts... It's like you've regressed back to how you were years ago."

When Raiden first met Shin, he seemed distressingly twisted. It was like staring at a powder keg. Shin may not have had much in the way of social skills these days, but it was still a great improvement from how reclusive he used to be. He'd talk to people only during briefings, when there was something to inform, and when it came time to finish off those who fell on the battlefield.

He hardly spoke to his fellow Eighty-Six squad mates or the maintenance crew. Just like his title implied, he was a reaper who faced someone only when death came to claim them... And in all likelihood, even if he thought of them as his comrades, he never opened his heart to anyone.

Thinking back on it, it was only natural. He was nearly killed by his brother, and then that brother died without ever forgiving him. He was constantly assigned to sectors where fighting was at its fiercest, and his squad mates always died, leaving Shin behind.

You...

You don't die, even when you're with me, do you?

Six months later, after their squad was abolished, they were on a transport plane taking them to their new assignment when he said those words. His voice was a bit higher then—the voice of a child, as it hadn't changed yet. At the time, Raiden shrugged him off with a "The fuck are you saying?" But back then, Shin probably still thought, somewhere in his heart, that his brother's death and the deaths of their comrades were all his fault somehow.

But it ain't your fault, man.

It was only recently, after Shin had managed to come to terms with things, that Raiden could tell him those words without him raising any counterarguments. It was only over the last couple of years, when they gained Name Bearer comrades who survived multiple years on the battlefield, like Kurena, Theo, and Anju... When they gained comrades who couldn't be killed so easily.

Shin's crimson eyes wavered as if he were enduring something, and he hung his head as if to hide them. He then said, without looking Raiden in the eye:

"In that case, you guys should take Frederica back. Better that I go alone than have to carry more burdens."

"...What did you just say?"

"If someone has to stay behind, it should be me and me alone. If you intend to go back, you shouldn't have to go down a path of no return."

"Why, you little...!"

Raiden's hand lashed out before he even realized what he was doing. He grabbed the collar of Shin's panzer jacket and took a step forward, pushing him against the pillar behind them, generating a dull, blunt noise.

"...That right there. That's what I'm talking about."

When they first met, there was a significant height gap between them, and it was no different now, even after they had grown older. He glared down into those red eyes all the same, the words spilling from between his clenched teeth.

"Stop thinking that sacrificing yourself will make everything better. 'If someone has to stay behind'? Stop talking like you're not coming back from this."

"...I don't intend to die."

"Yeah, I bet you don't. But you're not fully invested in the idea of coming back alive, either, are you?!"

If you intend to go back, he'd said. Like it was none of his business. Like it would be fine if he died. As if to say that if he alone died, no one would be hurt by it. And it wasn't something new. It had happened almost a year ago, at the last battle of their Special Reconnaissance mission, when he'd tried to act as a decoy. And even before that, at their final battle in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when he'd finally faced off against his brother's ghost.



The fact that Shin honestly believed it would be fine if everything ended right then and there was painfully obvious.

"Why did you even take down your brother? Wasn't it so that you could move on? *You didn't live just so you could kill your brother, did you...?* Don't mix those two things up!"

"In that case..."

His voice sounded like it was creaking, but at the same time, its tone was almost akin to a scream.

"In that case, what was the purpose of it all? What should I...?!"

Shin cut off the question, blurted out in what bordered on wrath, as if he was frightened. He fell silent, realizing that the moment he asked this question, he would have admitted he didn't know the answer himself.

Yeah, that's right... I finally understand.

This guy really is...like a blade. He was forged for a single purpose—endlessly sharpened for that one objective. And by the time his objective had been completed, the blade had grown so brittle that it shattered and fell apart. That's the kind of fragile person he is.

How did I fail to see it until now?

"...I don't want to die. That's all. And I think that's enough. I'm sure the others feel the same way."

And that was probably the only reason anyone needed to stay alive. But Shin had been assaulted and killed, told that it would be better if he wasn't around, and he'd fought constantly, until now, to atone for that sin. Having lived like that, Shin probably couldn't allow himself to live for anything but the sake of living.

"It's up to you to decide your own path. But you can rely on us, too, y'know... If you start feeling overwhelmed, we've got your back. When it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, you can take your time and rest. So..."

Like you did during that last battle of the Special Reconnaissance mission, when you chose to act as bait. Just like you did during the final confrontation in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when we encountered your brother's ghost. When you acted like we weren't there...

"...Don't try to fight all by yourself."

"Y'know, when they leave me out like this, it feels like I'm the one guy in the group who isn't treated like a man. Well, that sorta thing isn't my style anyway, so it's fine, I guess."

"Shin and Raiden have known each other for a long time, after all. A lot happened between them before they met us."

"I guess."

"Truly?"

"Looks like they had one of those 'fight their way to friendship' sort of scenes, like from one of those comics. Ask Raiden about it when he comes back."

...Well.

Hiding behind cover and whispering to one another as they peeked their heads in in height order were Anju, Theo, and Frederica. Their cover, incidentally, was Fido's container, which had been moved all the way to the cathedral's entrance.

The last remaining member of their ensemble, Kurena, had her arms bound behind her back by Anju and a hand clasped over her mouth as she desperately tried to say something but could produce only muffled *Mmms* and *Mhas*. She'd seen the two fighting and prepared to jump in like an angry puppy, but Anju had caught and pacified her.

Having confirmed that the talk was over and the two were gone (Shin shook off Raiden's grasp and walked away after what appeared to be the end of a scuffle), Anju finally let go of Kurena. Suddenly released in the middle of struggling to be set free, Kurena stumbled a few steps forward and turned around with the intent to snap at them, only to be silenced by Theo, who beat her to the punch.

"You know, Kurena, you butting in wouldn't have resolved anything. It might have actually made the situation worse. Restraine yourself a little, girl."

"Wha—? No... That's not true!"

"If you'd have come out, Shin would have totally just up and gone, ending the conversation right then and there."

"Boys have this thing where they'd rather die than let a girl see them being vulnerable, you know?"

"...Ah, yeah, Anju. But when you say it like that, it kind of depresses me, so can you not? Besides, that's not just a guy thing. Girls have those moments, too."

"I guess."

She smiled sweetly, to which Theo looked up and heaved a despondent sigh.

Looks like ever since Daiya died, I ended up getting all the crummy luck that used to fall on him...

Though that was a thought he didn't put into words. It was too obnoxious of a joke, and he could never let Anju hear that. They all dragged the shadows of the dead along with them, having seen so many of their comrades die.

But that said...

"...He really has been dragging that along. Shin's been kind of out of it lately."

Theo couldn't really imagine the future, either. But with Shin, it felt like he wasn't looking ahead at all, like he placed a lid on his thoughts and tried not to think about them. The dead were the past. You couldn't do anything for them but mourn their remains, as they were simply remnants of someone long gone. So trying to look at the future while still being haunted by the past... That was probably harder than anyone could imagine.

"...Actually, he was kind of off since that last battle before we even got to the Federacy. Even though he never let us, or himself, head into a battle he knew we didn't have a chance of walking away from..."

And that was because until that point, he'd had to make sure he put his brother's soul to rest. He'd had to survive...for the sake of that goal.

Kurena grimaced and let out a disgruntled moan.

"I don't think that's true."

Theo then said, with his eyes half-closed:

"...You need to look him straight in the eye, Kurena. You can't keep chasing his back like this."

"That's..."

"Shin isn't really...a reaper for our sake, you know?"

He isn't an idol for us to admire, to fawn upon, to depend on. That implication made Kurena fall silent. Her gaze darted here and there before she awkwardly looked away.

"...Fine."

"You've always been worried about that, Anju... Did you know?"

Anju smiled bitterly at the question.

"It's the same for me, after all... I know what it's like to have your own family tell you that they don't want you. It completely changes how you think the rest of the world perceives you."

"..."

"You just keep thinking everything might be your fault. You know, logically, that it isn't, but that guilt and self-deprecation never go away... And in Shin's case, his brother telling him he wasn't needed didn't boil down to just words, right? Those sorts of things don't go away on their own."

Kurena dropped her shoulders.

"So us just being with him...isn't enough?"

"In the end, it's like he's saying we're only going to be with him until we die. We're only relying on him one-sidedly, so you can understand him acting like his dying is none of our business."

In a sense, their relationship with Shin wasn't one of equals. And that's why Shin didn't treat him as a fellow man, Theo realized with an internal sigh. He let them depend on him, to have him shoulder their burdens...but that didn't mean he shared anything with them.

"...I wonder if we'll ever feel that way, too, someday. We probably will. We've never considered the future, or what we'll do after this."

Looking back on it, knowing that they'd die five years after enlisting was, in its own way, a mercy. They could withstand the horrors of the battlefield and the white pigs' malice because they could see an end to it just beyond the horizon. If they could just last that long, they would win. They could have fought until the very end and gone off with a smile. At least they would've had that small bit of dignity.

But now they had been told to live on, to fight and come back alive, without an end in sight. And when they thought they would have to live on for an unknown number of years, for unknown decades, for an excessively long period of time...the sheer perpetuity of it all made them freeze up in fear.

Could they, who had nothing but their pride, sustain themselves for that long now that they had lost that pride? Thinking of that made them lose all desire to think about the future.

"Shin had the tangible purpose of defeating his brother, and realizing that goal must have forced him to understand that he had no purpose beyond that. And it's probably the same for us. There's nothing we really want, nothing to look forward to at the end of the road."

They could go anywhere, but that was the same as having no real destination. It was like standing alone in the middle of a wasteland. They weren't just unable to go anywhere; all they could do was stand in one place, and even if they were to crouch down and wither away, no one would be there to stop them. It would be the same as being someone who could just as well not exist.

In time, they would eventually succumb to that crippling emptiness. It just happened a bit earlier for Shin.

Theo sighed bitterly.

"Just because he's in the vanguard doesn't mean he has to handle this before we do, too..."

That just meant that, however faintly, they could be prepared for the time when they would have to face that simple fact head-on. They had to accept the fact that they couldn't live the way they did on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, prepared to die on any given day.

"But I think it's very typical of Shin to worry about us so much, even if it doesn't seem that way at first."

"Definitely."

Nodding, Theo turned a sidelong glance toward Kurena.

"Just saying, Kurena, but now's a huge chance for you. You could take advantage of him being depressed, y'know?"

"Just saying, Theo, but even if it is a huge chance for her, it would take a real nasty woman to take advantage of that. And that doesn't suit our Kurena."

"Figures."

"Y-you're wrong! That's not how I—"

"Yeah, yeah. Hearing you say that is starting to get old. I mean, you're not exactly doing a good job of hiding it."

"Besides, you already admitted it yourself, Kurena. What's the point of saying that now?"

"That was..."

Kurena went red in an attempt to argue but then suddenly blushed even harder. She then asked in the thinnest voice they'd ever heard:

".....Do you think he's noticed, too?"

"..."

Theo and Anju exchanged looks despite themselves. The answer to that question would be a terribly cruel one, enough to make them hesitate saying it to her face.

"...I would presume he realized it a long time ago but sees it as a, shall we say, childish longing and desire to monopolize of sorts."

And someone just went and said it.

"He treats you as a younger sister... A difficult, troublesome sister, at that. In all honesty, he probably does not even acknowledge you as a woman."

"..."

Ah. Did Kurena's soul just leave her body?

As Anju faced Frederica with a somewhat incredulous smile and grabbed her by the shoulders, Theo regarded her with a glance as she shook her head with a pale face and tried to salvage Kurena's shattered psyche.

"I mean... C'mon. He does see you as a reliable comrade. Isn't that enough for now?"

"Y-yeah. I—I am a great sniper, after all! I'm totally reliable!"

Theo nodded, as that much was true. For an expert in hand-to-hand combat like Shin, who needed someone capable of providing laser-accurate cover fire in the midst of his melee skirmishes, Kurena was a priceless comrade who was hard to come by.

...Probably.

"But still... Yeah, um. So the Republic's fallen, huh...?"

For a decade, it had oppressed the Eighty-Six with the might and weight of a nation and ordered them to march to their deaths—and it was gone in the blink of an eye.

"I only saw it through observing Kiriya, so all I could see was the Gran Mur's fall and the sight of the Legion flooding its ruins. Unlike the Federacy, the front lines were shattered almost immediately. And at the pace things were going... I doubt they would have been able to sustain any semblance of a country in that condition."

"Figures. The Republic was willing to sacrifice the Eighty-Six if it meant their survival, and they based their entire defensive strategy around that."

"And in the end, we'd have to go down with them... Really, it's too disgusting for words."

The white pigs didn't care one bit, but to the Alba, who actually saw them as people, as well as their fellow Eighty-Six, the fact that an entire country was forced into this folly only to vanish into thin air...

They truly couldn't find anything to celebrate.

Kurena sighed dejectedly.

"Shin probably knew it first... Even though he said we're going on ahead."

Those were probably the first words he entrusted to another—the first time there was a person he wanted to entrust something to.

“The major never did catch up to us, did she...?”

Hearing the crunching sound of fallen leaves being crushed, Shin turned around to find Fido standing there. Their Juggernauts were enjoying a momentary rest in a corner of the paved square after heavy use over the course of the day. Feeling the gaze directed at him by the round optical sensor, Shin shrugged, standing beside his rig.

“You don’t have to worry. I won’t run off on my own.”

“...Pi.”

“Though, I’ll admit...going out alone would make things easier.”

That way, he wouldn’t have to dig any more graves.

The only one to hear the Reaper mutter those words was the obedient mechanical Scavenger that always followed in his footsteps.

†

Running through velvety-green fields glittering with specks of white flowers, Kiriya rushed along, scattering petals in his wake. The massive mechanical dragon sped through the Legion’s territory with nothing to stand in its way. Escaping the woodlands, he crossed the bridge, cutting through a river and across hills that were like the waves of a surging sea, and eventually stopped at the edge of his assigned sector.

While he was capable of single-handedly annihilating a fortress, his current body came with the disadvantage of requiring long cooldown periods. Firing a mere few hundred shells rendered his barrel useless, and replacing that alone took over half a day... This aspect would never cease to be an inconvenience.

That white Feldreß’s cruising speed may have equaled Kiriya’s, but unlike him, who traveled unimpeded through friendly territory, they had to break through enemy lines. They wouldn’t catch up to him that soon.

He spared a glance at the maintenance units beginning their work, then his gaze settled on the great gray shadow standing on the horizon.

<Pale Rider to No Face. Reporting arrival at appointed sector. Bombardment will recommence after maintenance work is complete, forty hours from now, at first light.>

<Acknowledged.>

Now, then.

His unexpected reunion and showdown with his kin or the fireworks display that would herald the beginning of the end for the human race. Which would come first...?

†

“Major General, it’s time to get up.”

While the three countries’ fighting lasted through the night, that merely meant that the combat units alternated. The military personnel still

managed to get some sleep. Be it inside combat jeeps or in the cargo spaces of their Vánagandrs, the combatants slept atop makeshift beds. This held equally true for the officers at HQ, which advanced farther into the battlefield in accordance with the changing of the front lines.

The major general frowned at the chief of staff, who stood in the corner of the canvas tent that served as HQ. He was dressed impeccably, even at this ungodly hour, and wore a disgruntled gaze. This man had stayed up late with him last night, working on today's operation plan, and had probably gone to sleep even later than he had, but he looked none the worse for wear.

"It's the difference in our ages, Richard... Or so I'd like to say, but you're still only thirty, aren't you? If you're not careful, your gut might start sticking out."

"Still cheerful, aren't you, Willem...? Being young allows you to do things that are beyond your means. You'll be like me before you know it."

"Will I, now?"

"You can keep talking a big game. It'll all catch up to you before you know it when you hit your thirties."

Maybe it was because he'd only just gotten out of bed, but the major general's voice reverted to his tone from years ago, when they were still in the military-staff college. He shook his head, trying to shrug off the grogginess the mere three hours of sleep had failed to do away with, and put on the jacket the chief of staff threw his way. Focusing on their primary objective, he asked straightaway:

"What is the status of the Eighty-Six?"

"We finally managed to Resonate with them just a short while ago... The Republic's technology does come in handy... Not that I'd want the Empire's laboratories to do anything like it."

He gave a thin smile, presenting the metallic collar known as the RAID Device. It was communication that linked the consciousness of one human and another, which meant animal experimentation was pointless. He could imagine the number of people—or to borrow the term the scum in the Republic used, *pigs in human form*—who had to be sacrificed to complete it.

From the major general's perspective, he'd have preferred to not rely on the fruit of the theory and technology established over such inhumane conduct, but the chief of staff didn't seem to share that sentiment. He may not condone those terrible crimes against humanity, but since they were available to him, he'd still make use of them if they were useful as a tool.

But, that aside...

"You *finally* managed to Resonate?"

"This thing requires both sides to be conscious, so it won't connect if they're asleep. I find it hard to believe they can sleep when they're crossing enemy territory with a small force of just five units, but..."

For the Eighty-Six, who'd lived in the battlefield before they'd even reached puberty and who'd survived for a month in the Legion's territory, it

probably felt like nothing more than an extension of their everyday routine. So they were used to it.

He recalled the exchange they'd had two months ago. The major general had been in service for over twenty years, if one included his time in the military academy, and had been on the front lines for ten, since the war with the Legion began. And even for him, the stress of combat weighed heavily on his mind and body.

But this was their routine, their day-to-day life. And what registered as normal for the Federacy seemed abnormal from their perspective. It made sense, then, that they didn't have enough time to get used to living in peace.

It took her five years to tame that thing... And how did she tame it?

The chief of staff's following words brought his speculation to a screeching halt.

"Where do you suppose they are right now? One hundred and twenty kilometers west of the old national border. When we had to march the whole night just to get this far. Isn't it infuriating?"

Realizing what the chief of staff was getting at, the major general cocked an eyebrow.

"Now, this is a surprise. I thought you intended to use those kids up in this battle until there was nothing left of them."

The chief of staff gave a detached shrug.

"You seem to be misunderstanding. All I want is for this sharpened sword to be put to good use. If we can make it last for a bit, even better... But if they end up being assimilated by the Legion, it'll be more than just trouble. We need them retrieved as soon as possible."

Having spent so long running through the battlefield with their machines, first Vánagandrs and then Reginleifs, waking up to a morning without either of those by their sides was off-putting for the Vargus. As they were preparing to set out again on their march, Bernholdt sat in a circle with his comrades in the corner of the camp. His assault rifle, the sole thing he took back from his abandoned unit, sat by his side as he raised his head, noticing Grethe's approach.

"We're setting out at second dawn, everyone. Are your preparations complete?"

"Affirmative, Lieutenant Colonel. We're ready to go whenever... I mean —"

He brandished his stock, collapsible Feldreß-pilot assault rifle.

"—we're traveling as light as possible here."

It was a 7.62 mm assault rifle with enough punch to blow off an adult male's limb, depending on where it hit, but against the Legion it was still insufficient. Grethe smiled at the infantry, who still stood on the battlefield even if the most they could do was fight off the Ameise or Grauwolf.

"Are you worried for the first lieutenant, Sergeant?"

"I'll be directing that question right back at you, Lieutenant Colonel. Are ya worried about 'em?"

"I've done everything I can. All that's left is to believe in them."

"Yeah, I'd say ya did. You got the boys over at maintenance to bring spare Reginleifs and repair parts just in case. Y'even twisted the big bad chief o' staff's arm into letting you get that transport plane o' yers ready."

And she made that appeal with a desperation tantamount to unconditionally surrendering any impression of being a sharp, coolheaded officer.

"My, but you chose to stick around even though I allowed you to retreat to the rear since there's not much more you can do here."

"Well, we've still gotta keep up appearances. If these kids come back from hunting that huge centipede, we can't let 'em see us geezers sitting on our asses gettin' drunk, can we? Wouldn't be able to live that down, y'know?"

That felt like just about the worst future possible. Heaving a long sigh, Bernholdt continued.

"...It'll be hard with an army o' these bulky tanks, but we should hurry. Your Juggernaut ain't half-bad, Lieutenant Colonel, but it doesn't have any experience running operations this long. We don't know what kinda issues might pop up."

"Right."

Not just the Reginleif but all Feldreß required maintenance time equal to their operation time. They weren't so fragile that they'd stop functioning immediately due to lack of maintenance, but the Reginleif was only recently deployed into live combat. There could still be some undiscovered defects.

Grethe nodded, and then she suddenly scowled.

"But it would seem even you lot call it the *Juggernaut*..."

"Reginleif's a name for a pretty Valkyrie. Doesn't fit a bunch of rowdy mercs like us."

He raised an eyebrow at the lieutenant colonel's disgruntled expression.

"Or for a bunch of brats who keep pulling crazy stunts no matter how many times you tell 'em off."

"Ah, shit."

Hearing Theo mutter that from the other side of the Resonance, Raiden turned his attention to Laughing Fox, ignoring the flaming wreckage of the Ameise in front of him. The sound of gunfire traveled far. It wasn't as audible in the contested zones, where shots were exchanged all the time, but the Legion's uninhabited territories were a different story.

For this reason, the Nordlicht squadron avoided combat as much as possible and, in cases where it was unavoidable, went on surprise attacks using melee weapons to dispatch their opponents quickly. And as Laughing Fox tried to jump over the remains of one Grauwolf they dispatched in such a fashion, it suddenly froze in place.

Apparently, its right front leg got caught in the Grauwolf's armor, and when he tried blowing it off with gunpowder, the pile wouldn't retract, effectively nailing him down.

"Can you get it off, Theo?"

"No can do. It won't budge... I'll have to purge it."

Using the actuator's output to forcibly extract the pile that was submerged into the thick metal armor put a great strain on the Juggernaut's joints. A moment later, the detonation bolt activated, and Laughing Fox got off, leaving the detached pile driver behind.

"So now Laughing Fox is damaged, too, huh...? I didn't think the damage would rack up this fast."

"...Anju and I got hit with shrapnel during the fight yesterday, and one of your machine guns broke when you got blown back..."

They'd each lost a machine gun, a wire anchor, or a pile driver, and they all had damages in the form of broken armor or bent frames. As they looked at the status window, they saw that Fido's remaining magazines, energy packs, and spare parts were starting to run low, too. The operation was expected to take less than half a day. They stocked up since there was a chance of them being isolated, but they didn't have enough for an operation lasting several days.

"I think Shin's the only one who hasn't taken any damage... Though we're all out of spare blades."

"...No."

Raiden raised an eyebrow. He and Shin hadn't really spoken since the fight they had last night. His tone was the same as always, and Shin wasn't one to strike up conversation for no reason to begin with, so it didn't feel like he was avoiding him.

"My propulsion system's been in bad shape since yesterday. I think I overburdened it in the first fight."

"...You still keep screwing up the suspension system after all this time?"

He'd still had an excuse when they were piloting the Republic's walking coffins, but how far did he push his rigs if even the Reginleif's propulsion system, which was built to be sturdy even when considering high-mobility battle, couldn't keep up with him?

"For the time being, I think I might be able to make do with some maintenance. It's not bad enough to stop it from moving."

"Yeah, but if you go too crazy with it, it'll fall apart before you know it. Don't pull any crazy stunts for now."

"..."

So this is the one request you can't respond to? What are you, a brat?

"Judging by our remaining ammo and energy packs, we have enough for a full day's pursuit tomorrow, and then that's it. We'll probably catch up to it before that happens, but we should conserve what we can until then anyway."

Hearing that terribly roundabout answer, Raiden dropped his shoulders with a grumble. He was still saying that bullshit.

Until we "catch up to it." Not "Until we regroup with the main force."

"...Roger that."

Sitting in Wehrwolf's cockpit, Frederica opened her "eyes." Her special ability allowed her to view those close to her and their surroundings, as if she were standing by their side. When viewing the present, she saw what they were seeing at the moment, but when it came to their pasts, she could see what that person was currently remembering, even if only subconsciously.

It seemed someone was recalling last fall, when they were forced by the Republic to march into the Legion's territories even at the risk of death. That was the beginning of their journey to freedom, which wasn't even supposed to last a month.

Where was this? The scenery was dyed with deciduous colors; standing nearby was a damaged four-legged Feldreß that looked brittle, even to her unknowledgeable eyes, and was covered with battle dust and a flash of a desert camouflage uniform. It was likely near the end of their journey, when they realized they probably wouldn't be able to advance much farther.

Still, they were smiling. Even with their faces pale and tired, they exchanged jokes and chatted and laughed. From Frederica's perspective, the black-haired boy stood with his back to her, but the smile playing on his lips was etched into her gaze.

Shin was smiling after having simultaneously accomplished and lost his objective of burying his brother, yet still saw the path to tomorrow spread out before him.

Why did he lose that smile...?

Shaking her head, Frederica closed her eyes.

†

One hundred and twenty kilometers away from old Kreutzbeck City, an Ameise on patrol found it in the evergreen oak forest. Something two meters in height had passed by earlier, crushing the twigs. It was the footprints of a four-legged weapon that wasn't of the Legion.

Scanning the vicinity for further traces with its multipurpose sensor, the Ameise sent a report to the main force.

<Foxtrot 113 to tactical data link. Existence of a hostile element infiltrating the territories confirmed.>

†

The Reginleifs rushed through the abandoned battlefield, tearing across the eastern horizon and leaving it behind, chasing the setting sun toward the south. The United Kingdom's army successfully kept the Legion's main force at bay, as did the joint forces of the Federacy and the Alliance along the high-speed railway of the southern route of the Eaglebloom. Even with Shin's ability, being able to avoid engaging the enemy with the exception of the first battle was impressive.

Cruising through the oddly peaceful battlefield, Frederica found herself mesmerized time and again by the sights of the Legion's territories displayed on the optical screen. Clusters of blue flowers bloomed magnificently, growing en masse in the forest. Sunlight shone through the foliage growing between pillars, making the sky-blue petals sparkle like gemstones.

She saw a town overrun with greenery. The grass grew uninhibited, penetrating the flagstones and enveloping the roadside, the abandoned automobiles, the flag posts, and a statue of a saint. Vines coiled around the neglected residential houses. Atop those rusted remnants bloomed gentle flowers of autumn.

She saw an abandoned village. Perhaps owing to the quality of the land there, the houses were formed of bricks in soft, colorful pastels, making it seem like a place taken straight out of the land of picture books and fairy tales. In the center of a grassy thicket—once a wheat field—that grew wild and up to the height of an adult stood a thin, faded scarecrow. There it remained, as if patiently awaiting someone's return.

At noon, they took a long break in the ruins of an abandoned city. They chose to settle down in a church that seemed to be designed in the style of a gothic cathedral. It was a grand, solemn sight. The subtly designed stained glass that reached up to the ceiling sparkled in its transparency, casting a colorful shadow on this deserted sanctuary and granting its eternal blessing even without anyone being there to receive it.

By the time the sun reached its zenith, any forests and cities they could take cover in had all been left behind them, and they were forced to run along an open shore of a large lake despite the risk of detection. An abandoned castle loomed in the distance, casting the reflection of its white spires and ramparts into the water alongside the blue sky as crimson petals soared overhead. The wind blew through the crumbling arrow slits, and the shadow of a black bird of prey soaring in the sky flew above them. Its wings seemed tattered even from afar, and yet, this lone bird rode the winds to parts unknown.

It was serene. And beautiful.

Frederica thought that maybe now she understood a bit why the Eighty-Six's values were so detached from the Federacy's—and even humankind's fate. If they could regularly witness such spectacles reclaiming the settlements people once inhabited, it would only be natural to feel that way...

This world was a beautiful place. Even without the presence of humans, the world was serene and beautiful. There wasn't a single place in this world that required the presence of human beings to flourish.

This world really didn't need humans.

There's no such thing as a "place to belong." Not anywhere, nor for anyone... No matter who.

Eventually, the sun dipped below the horizon. The final rays of sunlight for that day blazed over a cloudless sky, etching long shadows into the plains below. A large, distant mountain range cut out the sky to the south with its black spires as the Juggernauts sped through a sea of grass dyed in red light, dragging shadowy silhouettes in their wake.

Looking at the fields that were awash with red sunlight on one side and flooded with black shadows on the other, Frederica finally parted her lips to speak. It was like a sea, they said. It was a trite metaphor, but its movements were like receding waves.

"...Have any of you seen the ocean?"

It was neither a question nor a monologue, and as such, no answer came from anyone, including Raiden, who shared the unit with her.

"I have not. Such a sight is unknown to me... There are far too many things that remain unknown to me. What of you?"

Her crimson eyes narrowed sadly as she gazed at the optical screen with longing.

"I wish to see the sea. And I would like to try swimming. Ernst showed me pictures of his honeymoon, from some sea in the south. There were so many people... It was lovely, I'm sure."

The Federacy didn't have an ocean in its borders. During the Empire's reign, it had a single connection to the sea, a naval port in the northern border. If one wanted to go swimming, one would have to go to a neighboring country, such as the Republic of San Magnolia's southern shore or farther south to the Alliance of Wald, and currently, neither of those were accessible to the Federacy with the Legion standing in the way.

After a short pause, Kurena said:

"The sea... I never did get to see it."

"None of us really ventured too far from where we lived. Being taken to the internment camp was probably my first time traveling. I think I saw the sea one time when they took me to a new sector on a transport plane, but looking back on it, maybe I'm remembering wrong."

"It wasn't a beach, but they did let us play around in a nearby lake once when I was little... It was fun, I guess. Lots of good people came from all over."

"I think elementary schools had an event like that every few years, but then the war started... And that was that. Never seen the sea myself."

Shin could feel a small, almost childish chuckle come from the Resonance. He couldn't tell who it was.

"The ocean, huh...? I would like to see it. Let's go there together, once the war's over."

"If we're on the topic, a southern island sounds like a nice idea. Y'know, white sands, coral reefs, palm trees, the whole shebang."

"Or we could go to the north. See the frozen sea, maybe. I hear that when it gets really cold, you can walk over the ice. That'd be pretty cool."

"Guess we can make do with the sea of stars, for now. Kujo kept talking about watching the moon. We should make preparations next time."

They were marching cautiously enough, but there was no sight of the enemy for the moment. Before long, the suspense wore off, and they started chatting about whatever came to mind. But there was one among them who didn't participate. It was something everyone noticed but decided not to address.

For their second camp of the day, they chose an elaborate exhibition hall sitting in the center of the ruins of a large city. Before it got too dark, they sped through their Juggernauts' maintenance—after an entire day's march. Once the sun had set and dinner was finished, all that was left was to get some sleep.

After they had retrieved the collapsible beds from Fido's container and drawn blankets over themselves, Raiden and the others were asleep in the blink of an eye. It wasn't a comfortable sleep by any means, but the Eighty-Six were no strangers to resting in harsh conditions. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, it wasn't unusual to spend some nights out with nothing but a thin blanket for warmth.

But it was certainly hard on Frederica, who up until now had spent every night of her young life on a soft mattress. She was lying down in the pitch-black darkness, unable to fall asleep even with her eyes shut, and eventually gave up. Crawling out from her blanket, she rose from the pipe-and-canvas contraption that was a bed only in name and slid her feet into her small military boots.

The bed's makeup was such that the canvas hung low to the ground, making it as cold as the concrete beneath it. Near the bed, she noticed some insect, the likes of which she'd never seen before, crawling about like it owned the place. She recoiled slightly from this strange creature. Sleeping without the stuffed toy she'd spent every night with for the last six months made her anxious.

They were in an atrium on the top floor, which they had accessed through a wide corridor that connected to several halls of differing sizes comprising the exhibition hall. The atrium's canopy was torn, with starlight pouring into the room.

They were in the farthest depths of the battlefield, without a single artificial light in sight, and Frederica didn't realize true darkness could be so...dark. At the end of the corridor sat a Juggernaut with its limbs folded in. And standing next to it, watching over the others as they slept, was Shin, serving as the first person on night watch. He raised his head to look at her sharply.

"...Can't sleep?"

He regarded her not like he might a Legion on patrol but, rather, with the caution he might reserve for a wild animal.

Animals born after the Legion took control of this land over a decade ago had never seen humans and, as such, didn't fear them, either. They didn't distinguish between people and animals, or rather, homeothermic mammals of a similar size, but they did fear the Legion: beings capable of massacre

far beyond the scope of what humankind could ever hope to accomplish. As such, they tended to shy away from the scent of metal and gunpowder, but one still needed to stay vigilant.

When they spent the night back when they had to cross the territories and were unable to light bonfires, they took shifts like this. They kept watch for a few hours per rotation, and the others probably assigned him the first shift (the easiest) out of consideration. The voices of the Legion reached Shin even as he slept, and no one else could help him shoulder that burden. So if nothing else, they wanted to let him sleep the longest.

"Aye. Forgive me; I'm here despite not having been appointed to the sleepless vigil like you. I simply cannot fall asleep..."

Receiving a mug of instant coffee, she sat down next to him on his collapsible bed, which served as a makeshift chair. Their combat rations came with enough solid fuel to boil instant coffee. They'd boiled it earlier during dinner, so it was now only lukewarm—and sweet due to all the sugar they mixed in to compensate for the calories they burned during battle. Frederica gulped it down.

"Don't let it bother you. If we were going to let someone who can't hold a rifle handle night watch, we'd be better off letting Fido do it."

"*Pi.*"

"...Fido. Didn't I tell you to stay in standby mode until we woke you up tomorrow because staying activated eats up your energy-pack charge?"

"*Pi.*"

".....Fine. Do whatever you want."

Its optical sensor flickering as if to signify a nod, Fido made no sign of moving. It probably intended to stay there until Shin's shift was over and he could go to sleep. Seeing Shin sigh at it following him around like a faithful—if stubborn—attendant made Frederica crack a smile...and then suddenly frown.

It was probably due to them being on the battlefield, but the Eighty-Six—Shin included, of course—often tended to stand close to their Juggernauts. The other four slept as if snuggling up to their rigs. Shin, meanwhile, entrusted his back to Undertaker as it was bathed in starlight, standing on night watch with his assault rifle propped against his shoulder. Like a child afraid of going to sleep without his favorite stuffed animal.

The warped circumstances in which they grew up—between the threat of the Legion on one side and the persecution at the hands of the Republic on the other—attributed to them living like this. Their only true home was a battlefield where tomorrow wasn't guaranteed, and they were unable to look away from the deaths staring them in the face.

Perhaps, in a way, they were far younger than they looked.

"...What?"

"It's nothing."

Frederica was just as warped. She looked to the night sky, as if trying to flee from his familiar crimson eyes.

In contrast to how the cold of winter seemed to sharpen the starlight, the stars of autumn twinkled peacefully like a silent whisper. The glow of countless distant stars filled the heavenly sphere. The vivid scent of grass she'd enjoyed throughout the day died down. And the aroma of flowers played against the starlight, resulting in a sweet and gentle darkness.

But to Frederica's eyes, this sight was as cruel as it was beautiful. This aroma of the flowers and starlit darkness could exist only because there had been no people to sully their presence. If there had been people here before they showed up, the lights and commotion of the city would have corrupted this transient spectacle. A scorching desert, an infertile wasteland, ruins polluted to the point of being uninhabitable, and this picturesque view, in a sense, were all fundamentally the same thing.

Desolate.

Looking away, she faintly made out the lonely form of a worn-out, abandoned rabbit doll lying in the corner of the large room.

"...Is this sight..."

Those mechanical monsters were originally created to be ruthless instruments of slaughter, but some, even if not by choice, carried the souls of what were once humans.

"...the world the Legion wish for?"

Frederica's words were less of a question and more of a soliloquy, but after a moment of pondering, Shin shook his head.

"Who can say?"

Shin could only speculate as to what the Legion were thinking from the voices of the dead trapped within them, repeating their final thoughts. The cries of the mechanical ghosts reaching his ears all seemed to wish for the same thing—to go home.

"...They might not be wishing for anything."

They were originally weapons-tools to facilitate the wishes of others.

"They're ghosts. Both those that took in the dead—and those that didn't. And the dead...don't wish for anything."

"How can you tell?"

"...Because I'm just like them."

He had been strangled, but he had cheated death. But in a way, he probably had died. And ever since that night, he truly hadn't wished for anything. Having killed his brother, he had nothing left. Not a thing he wanted to do nor a place he wanted to see. He never could think of the future.

He purposefully did not meet the crimson eyes staring up at him. But even if he ignored them, he remained just as conscious of them.



"The ocean..."

It was a sight the Legion stole away from them. One that Shin—who was born in the Republic's capital of Liberté et Égalité and then sent to the concentration camps, which he couldn't leave—never got to see.

"I can't honestly say I want to see it. There's nowhere I want to go or anything I want to see, and that doesn't particularly bother me, either... But I do understand that not having something you want to try, as they mentioned earlier, is strange."

Truly not having any desires that could be summed up into such trivial little wishes was all too strange. But last autumn, when they were crossing the territories from the other direction, he truly did enjoy it... Yes, he thought it was fun. The sights of nature no one but they could see, the customs of the many different cities and villages they visited. Sometimes they stopped to rest, and other times they passed through, but whatever they did was of their own choosing.

It was their first taste of true freedom. And at the time, Shin truly did enjoy himself, as his companions did. And that was because he knew it would end. Someday, at the end of his journey, he would die in the embrace of his aluminum coffin in some remote corner of the battlefield, without having reached anywhere or achieved anything, with no one to tell his tale.

And that's how it should have been. But his brother saved him, and the Federacy sheltered him. He survived longer than he expected and was suddenly faced with a future that was longer and more uncertain than he could have ever imagined.

For Shin, who was prepared to die at a moment's notice, it was far too long a future and far too distant a destination. The future they obtained was far too vast, and without kin or country to serve as their guides, that emptiness was far too...terrifying.

His friends would have been the same, but somewhere along the road they found other things to keep them going. Other things to live for. And having nothing to live for was the same as not being alive. Having nothing to live for meant you weren't even trying to live. And so he remained the only one who was not yet alive.

"I'm not your knight."

Once again, he repeated the words he'd spat at Frederica a month ago, when the operation had just been decided, and sighed slightly.

"I knew that, and yet... I'm sorry. I used your knight as an excuse."

An excuse to return to the battlefield when he had nowhere else to go.

"I'm heading toward my final destination all the same, but my brother isn't there anymore. So I needed something to take his place."

Frederica scoffed.

"I believe there's more to it than that."

"...?"

"You should be aware that the way you observe your reflection in the mirror is wrong. You are not as coldhearted nor as cruel as you might believe yourself to be. You would even cast aside salvation if it meant bringing peace to another. Even for a mere ghost... You truly are a kindhearted reaper."

Staring far into the distance, she whispered.

"If nothing else—thanks to you obliging my request, I will set Kiri free."

Shin turned his attention to the far horizon, where her knight continued to wail.

"I pitied him, trapped as he is in the battlefield, lamenting his fate for eternity. I wanted to set him free... I wanted to set *myself* free from his anguish. What of you?"

"...No."

He may have wished to soften the voices crying out from the depths of the battlefield, but not once did he wish to silence them completely.

"Even I..."

At that moment, Frederica smiled, looking to be on the verge of tears.

"...am afraid of ending Kiri."

She was afraid of losing anyone else...

"I am an unwanted child in this Federacy. Now that it has become a federal republic, my being alive could become the spark that ignites turmoil. I am a child of calamity... My absence would only benefit everyone."

The Federacy had gone from a dictatorship to a federal republic, but some of the former nobles, who had once held power and monopolized all authority, still maintained some latent political influence. Even Shin, who had only been in the Federacy for less than a year and spent the majority of that time in the military, noticed that fact. Once he examined things more closely, he noticed those in the higher ranks were almost exclusively those of pureblood noble birth. The majority of the generals were either Onyxes or Pyropes.

If those among them with ambition were to learn that an empress—a just cause to subvert the government—still lived...

"And yet, I lived on, believing that I would one day have to put an end to my knight... But once I do end Kiri, I will have lost that reason. And that... frightens me."

"..."

And yet.

If she didn't bury him... If she didn't make things right, she wouldn't be able to move on.

"...The reason the way forward makes you shudder so much is because you're properly looking to the future. Because you realized you're walking an untrodden path. There's no shame in that, and even in such times of doubt, you should rely on those walking by your side for support. That is why comrades exist. That is why...people stick together."

"...Raiden told me that, too."
But cold thoughts stabbed their icy daggers into his heart.
Even if they're with me now, at this moment...even those who call me "our Reaper"...will one day, certainly...

"Leave you behind...?"

"...?"

"...Never mind."

The seemingly ambiguous statement was left at that, and it faded into the darkness of night.

†

It was first light. The sun peeked out over the horizon in the wee hours of morning. Detecting the first rays of light just barely illuminating the surrounding area, Kiriya awakened from standby mode. Like swords serving as grave markers stuck into the ground, countless bent and burnt-out cannon barrels littered the battlefield as dawn broke. His countless extensions, having covered the ground like a filament, also awoke and rose into the air with a flutter of their wings.

It was time to begin the sweeping operation. The Eintagsfliege that had helped keep him under the cover of night retreated, and the Legion under his command began moving from several dozen kilometers away. There were no signs of movement from the enemy forces yet. Attacking at dawn was a relic of past eras when radar and night-vision devices didn't exist. But such tactics were still effective against an enemy who could employ neither.

The Ameise's observational data transmission arrived. Using this, he observed the armor-plated concrete structure in his optical sensors. Capable of seeing only a few dozen meters ahead, he could just barely make out the summits of the horizon.

<Pale Rider to No Face. Commencing sweeping operation.>

The unsleeping combat machine's reply arrived immediately.

<No Face, acknowledged... A transmission arrived from the wide area network.>

...Mm?

<Traces of an enemy unit that had infiltrated the territories were discovered. Given the situation, it is hypothesized they are in pursuit of you. As such, commence search activities in sectors adjacent to your location.>

<...Acknowledged.>

So you did come after me, kinsman.

The fireworks display is starting soon. So before it does...make it to me.

†

"Let's go."

It was the third day of the operation. Regardless of the outcome, today would be its final day. Within the blue darkness of dawn, the Juggernauts slipped through city ruins, moving in a modified platoon-wedge formation.

They moved through a main street, where a faded, tattered, five-hued flag flapped noisily. They rushed over the shards of glass littering the pavement and passed over the fallen statue of a woman.

Suddenly, the skies to the west flashed, and the sound of impact echoed from afar. As concentrated fire rained from the sky, a thick cloud of dust rose up in the horizon.

"That's...not the Morpho. This is Skorpion fire."

"They're pretty much off the mark, though... That's not where the Federacy's main force is. What are they trying to shoot at...?"

And just as Anju said it, everyone—herself included—held their breath in unison. In the wake of the dust clouds, raging flames dyed the sky over the impact point a deep crimson.

"Incendiary bombs...?!"

Those were shells that had fuel mixed with thickener injected into them, which would spread out and ignite during impact. The intent was to set the enemy ablaze. Since both the Republic and the Federacy employed stone architecture that didn't ignite easily, the Legion rarely used them, but they were a vicious type of bombardment.

The viscous fuel inside the shells was capable of clinging to its victims as it burned, and it couldn't usually be extinguished by water. Should a human be splashed with it, the only fate awaiting them was an agonizing death.

The sky flashed again. From between the buildings, they could see the treetops of the forest in the horizon catching fire within seconds.

"God dammit, they're trying to smoke us out!"

The Legion probably found traces of their infiltration of the area. Even state-of-the-art Reginleifs weren't able to march through a sea of burning flames. They lacked the coolant necessary to do so, and with all the oxygen in the air burning, the pilots would eventually suffocate.

A third bombardment. An even closer spot caught fire. They were systematically destroying every hiding spot in the area.

"Shin!"

"We've got no choice. Let's go. All units, prepare for combat. We'll make contact with the first enemy line in three hundred seconds."

Confirming the positions of the Legion in the area, they rushed through the ruins by way of the path of least resistance and kept going until they reached the plains.

When the Skorpion types roared again, and their bombardment rained from the heavens, the city ruins finally entered the range of their fire. A shell impacted nearby, and the street was engulfed in flames almost instantly. Live trees didn't normally burn as easily, but when exposed to fuel with a combustion temperature reaching as high as 1,300 degrees Celsius, that didn't matter.

The area was doused with muddy fluid time and time again, turning into a sea of fire within moments as tongues of flames licked the vaporizing surfaces. The ruins turned into an inferno under the cover of dawn, black-

and-red shadows dancing across them. As old buildings crumbled under the tyranny of those flames, the group barely made it out of the city.

"Ah, they found us!"

Shin made out the silhouette of an Ameise standing near the horizon, its sensors pointed right at them. In the next moment, Gunslinger sniped it down. But the data transmission likely traveled through the data link before her 88 mm could even finish its roar. The surrounding Legion units had already been alerted to their presence. Then they crossed over the horizon and were faced with a massive army that spread out before them like a veil of black clouds, making even Raiden's breath stop in his throat.

"What are those numbers...?! How do they always keep coming out in droves like this...?!"

"Just goes to show that the Morpho is extremely important to them... The left wing is the thinnest. Break through at maximum combat speed."

"...Roger."

Flames danced on the wind. The waste and debris left in the wake of the burning rode the updraft into the heavens, absorbed water, and became rain. The Juggernauts crossed the plains as black rain, thick with soot, washed over them, rushing through the low, thorny mountainous road. Having accomplished its objective, the onslaught of incendiary bombs came to an end. A shower of howitzer shells took its place as the silent metallic shadows peeked through the shadows of the trees.

The mountain's steep formation made the tree trunks and roots intertwine, preventing the heavyweight Löwe and Dinosauria from entering. But the Ameise, which were in a similar weight class to the Juggernauts, remained in hot pursuit. Through the gaps in the branches, a formation of Löwe could be seen closing the gap by way of a relatively calm riverbed. They were kept up-to-date with their targets' position thanks to a data link. The children caught a glimpse of a cliff beneath them.

"Shin, how far to the target?"

"Fifteen thousand meters, straight ahead. It moved forward for a bit before stopping again... I can't tell what they're planning, but let's take advantage of this and close the distance."

Frederica then said:

"It looks like he's aiming at something... But I cannot tell where he is. He's got fixed cannons lined up; he should not be able to provide covering fire to the front lines..."

Having said that, she gulped nervously. Her silence suggested there was a development she couldn't make sense of, but there was no time to confirm.

"They're shooting at us from below!"

One of the Löwe below swerved its turret, turning its 120 mm barrel in their direction. Folding its segmented front legs, it forced itself to fire from an inconvenient angle of elevation.

"...!"

It impacted the face of the cliff, crumbling the ground between Laughing Fox and Snow Witch as they advanced in the wedge formation. Mud and dirt flew into the air as a Skorpion shell impacted nearby, as if to make doubly sure they were hit. A 155 mm shell, capable of reducing sturdy trenches into piles of sediment, burst upon hitting the ground, uprooting the trees that supported the muddy hill.

"Ah...?!"

Caught in the landslide, Snow Witch slipped down the hill.

"Anju?!"

"Nng... I'm fine. The unit isn't damaged, either. But..."

Having slipped roughly ten meters down to flat ground, Snow Witch pulled her legs out of the dirt and turned her head. The red optical sensor surveyed the crumbled cliff face, then shook left and right. The Juggernaut's optical sensor operated by tracking the pilot's line of sight, which meant Anju probably shook her head.

"No good. I don't think I can climb up. I'll try to hold them off here... Fido, leave me all the spare missile pads you can!"

Fido hit the emergency brakes, pitched forward, and deployed the container behind it, sliding all the missile pads it had down the crumbling cliff face. Sparing this sight a parting glance, the remaining four Juggernauts moved along the solid ground, rushing forward. The Ameise in pursuit of them spread out to avoid the Skorpion fire but still came after them from another route. They couldn't afford to stay put.

As Fido struggled to keep up with the rest of the group on the winding road, they could hear explosions coming from the riverbed behind them. They fired anti-armor explosive shells into the air, their fuses going off as they crashed down onto the Löwe, specifically the weak points on their upper armor. They heard roars echoing a second and third time, from different directions, but the Juggernauts—traveling at a cruising speed of over one hundred kilometers per hour even on the unsteady mountain road—left those explosions behind them before long.

The Ameise, despite not comparing in terms of cruising speed, could move along the road just as easily, but having the benefit of a data link led them to drop the pursuit and request that another unit take over. Shin could sense the Legion patrolling several kilometers ahead of their current position switch directions, moving to block their expected path.

Hearing the same voices through the Sensory Resonance, Theo scoffed.

"They're still coming, the persistent bastards... Only ten thousand meters till we reach the target. If they cling to us like this, they'll get in our way while we're fighting the Morpho."

Escaping the clouds of ink-black rain, they got off the mountain by skidding down an incline. They dug their feet into the steep foothills as they slid and rushed toward the stone structures of the small city ahead.

As soon as they entered the main street, Laughing Fox moved to the rear and turned its bearing. It fired a wire anchor into a building as it turned in a

half circle and then mowed it down with another revolution of its fuselage. The building collapsed with a crash, nine years of exposure to the elements taking their toll, on top of having its supporting pillar destroyed with pinpoint precision. The rubble collapsed, as if to cut Laughing Fox, who stood at the rear of the formation, away from the remaining three Juggernauts.

The Legion, noticing the collapsing building's vibrations and reverberations, began rushing toward the center of the commotion. Hearing their voices close in on him, Theo laughed sharply.

"It's all flat land ahead of here, right? Well, I'm not really useful outside of a place like this, so I'll stay here and play decoy! I'll do what I can to distract them, so you guys handle the rest!"

†

The numbers of the small invading force seemed to have been *reduced by two*, and both seem to have been caught and are currently engaging surrounding friendly units.

<Acknowledged.>

Receiving the report from the wide area network, Kiriya withstood the urge to sigh in exasperation. Not that he had the lungs or mouth to do so even if he wanted to. It seemed a few small fry were detected on one of the mountains. Such a blunder was unbecoming of someone who had Nouzen blood coursing through his veins. And yet, Kiriya applauded the coolheaded judgment that allowed him to leave his comrades behind to serve as decoys while he advanced, even at the cost of their sacrifice.

Contrary to the report, his own radar—which boasted high fidelity and a wide range for antiair-defense purposes—had already detected the approaching enemy force. It was separate from the enemy engaging the Löwe in the mountains and the one running around in the ruins; it was a third detachment that wasn't recognized by the wide area network. It was a total of four units, and judging by their reactions, three of them were the new Federacy Feldreß model.

<Pale Rider to wide area network.>

It was his chance encounter with his kin. He couldn't let the rank-and-file weaklings get in the way.

<Executing bombardment schedule as ordered. Henceforth, all communications until objective completion will be blocked.>

Choosing not to transmit the information he'd acquired, he sent that single transmission and shut off his connection. But with that said, the other side was bringing its own share of nuisances. So for starters, he would have to separate him from them.

†

"Get away! He's shooting!"

Frederica shouted to Shin from the Resonance at almost the same moment as the Morpho's cries increased in magnitude. A moment after he reflexively pulled back the control sticks, a shell impacted near the point Undertaker had leaped to. Having traveled at supersonic speeds, the shell's shock waves sent his unit flying as sediment and earth bashed against its fuselage-like bullets.

"...!"

A second blast. The barrage that fell on the dusky hills, undulating like waves in a stormy sea, was almost like a barrage of machine-gun fire—no, it truly was a barrage of shells, making the three units spread out almost like they were scattered away by the force of its shots.

How can it fire so precisely...? Wait, no.

"It's his close-range armaments."

What they'd seen in the Republic's first ward and right before they'd entered the Federacy's territories, as well as the concentrated fire that had destroyed the western front's FOBS—all were far weaker bombardments than what the Morpho had fired directly at them the last time they'd engaged it. Shin's support computer calculated the shells' initial velocity to eight thousand meters per second. Rather than using its main armament as is, it probably reduced the warheads' mass using an autocannon with a lower aperture that granted it a rapid-fire function. Even the antiair-defense system it had installed to shoot down approaching missiles was configured around the Morpho's railgun.

Having Frederica accompany them turned out to be a good thing, after all, Shin noted with a bitter smile. It seemed that when it came to this knight of hers, Frederica was faster to pick up on the Morpho's attacks than he was. The relative difference between them and the Morpho was seven thousand meters, which meant the Morpho's shells would impact within less than a second of firing. In these conditions, having her around was a definite advantage.

The shower of tungsten shells, charged with monstrous kinetic energy from its high-speed propulsion, decimated the battlefield in moments. Leaping, strafing, and rolling around, the three Juggernauts had to employ every bit of technique and intuition at their disposal in order to keep evading. If an armor-piercing shell was to impact one of them at this speed, a Vánagandr wouldn't be able to withstand it, to say nothing of a Juggernaut's aluminum armor. Their only choice was to keep dodging.

"You little...!"

Clicking her tongue as she took advantage of the several-second pause the Morpho needed in between attacks to prevent its gun barrel from overheating, Kurena deployed her sniper rifle. Aiming beyond the hills with an accuracy none of the others could imitate, she fired, forcing the target to flinch and pause its attack.

"I'll distract it, so go! It was a buckshot, so it didn't do much damage!"

She fired a few more restraining shots, then leaped a short distance from the direction Undertaker and Wehrwolf were dodging in just as she fired her last one, putting even more distance between them. Another barrage of shells rained from the heavens, obliterating her former position, and the resulting line of fire moved in pursuit of Gunslinger.

“Hurry!”

“Sorry.”

Shin could feel the pride in Kurena’s smile.

“I’ll handle this.”

†

The enemy unleashed an endless spray of bullets at Kiriya from beyond the hills. It seemed to be coming from a single unit. It disappeared from his radar once it took cover in the hills, but there were still four units in the position it was last sighted. At this rate, uninvited guests may end up coming here, and engaging the enemy while this sniper kept firing on him would be irritating. It would have to be eliminated, promptly.

He lifted his upper half. Twisting his body, he turned his rear optical sensor, and in the next moment, bolts of blue electricity began slithering like serpents at the base of his gun barrel.

†

White noise suddenly crackled over their optical screens.

“What’s going on...?”

“This isn’t electronic jamming. It looks like it’s just some electromagnetic waves in the air.”

And as soon as he said it, he realized. A railgun was a projectile weapon that employed vast amounts of electricity to accelerate and launch spherical projectiles. So whenever it attacked...

...it scattered powerful electromagnetic waves in its vicinity.

The Morpho’s roar intensified.

“Kurena, that’s enough; get away from there!”

A bright light flashed from beyond the hills, and a thunderous roar echoed overhead before landing behind Undertaker and Wehrwolf.

“Kurena!”

“Aaaaaaaaaah!!”

They could hear the sound of something slicing the wind—like the fragments of a massive shell that exploded in midair and violently rained shrapnel—and then the sound of impact. Gunslinger’s blip disappeared, and Kurena’s Para-RAID shut down.

For a moment, both of their minds ground to a halt. Taking advantage of this momentary pause, the Morpho resumed firing its close-range armaments. A fan-shaped firing line ravaged the earth. The arrow of metal

traveling at supersonic speed painted the blue skies over with the color of metal for a moment before the shower rained down on them diagonally.

They didn't have the presence of mind to dodge. The most they could do was crouch and reduce the surface area exposed to the shells. And still, the bombardment grazed against the side of Shin's unit, blowing off Undertaker's front left leg.

"...!"

"Raiden!"

That moan of subdued pain and Frederica's scream made Undertaker freeze in place halfway through its attempt to get up. Looking onward, he saw that Wehrwolf was also crouching on the ground, unable to get up.

"...You're injured."

It wasn't a question, but a confirmation. His Para-RAID was still connected, but the damage to his rig was severe. Both of its right legs were blown off, and the cracks in its armor clearly extended all the way to the cockpit. And from the looks of things, the ones sitting inside couldn't have gotten away unscathed.

"Y-you covered for me."

"It ain't bad enough to kill me, but...sorry, this is where I'll be dropping out of the race."

Multilegged units had the advantage compared to treadmill units in that they were able to keep moving to some extent even after taking damage. But with all legs of one of his sides gone, that was impossible.

...A thought occurred to Shin.

I guess that would still be better than leaving her with Wehrwolf, now that it's completely incapable of fighting.

"Fido. Let Frederica ride you."

Fido approached with a clatter. Because it kept a certain distance away from them, it wasn't exposed to the shelling, but there was still a wobble to its gait. Its legs had probably gotten damaged by shell fragments or the shock wave. Shin realized that in this condition, his order was too much for the unarmed scrap-collecting robot.

"If I don't make it, take Frederica and retreat. Don't bother recovering the others, either. Bring her back to the Federacy, no matter what."

"Pi."

"Shinei!"

Fido beeped back in what felt like a solemn nod, and Frederica cried out in protest. Shin continued, ignoring her voice.

"You're afraid of losing him, but you still want to save him, right? Then live on so that you can accomplish that."

"..."

He could feel Frederica nodding as she bit her lip. Wehrwolf's canopy flung open, and a small shadow climbed out of it and then ran into Fido's opened container. Shin nodded at the tall shadow, raising a hand to him from the cockpit, despite knowing he couldn't see it.

"Don't die on us."

"...Yeah."

Whispering under his breath, Undertaker, the last remaining unit, rushed onward. Only three thousand meters remained. He sped around the final hill, and...

...a layer of pure, boundless blue spread out before him.

CHAPTER 9

VENI, VENI, EMMANUEL

The azure spectacle before him was the product of countless blue butterflies. They spread their metallic wings, the color of lapis lazuli, as they blanketed the fields as far as the eye could see. They were similar to the Eintagsfliege, and just like the Admiral, which they served under, the wings of these Legion units served as solar panels. The Generator Extension type: Edelfalter.

The kaleidoscope of mechanical butterflies looked like fragments of the sky had frozen and flaked away. They kept their forms folded under the darkness of early dawn but suddenly spread their wings out all at once and flew away as if fleeing from the white metallic spider creeping into their territory. Countless gun barrels were planted into the ground like headstones, perhaps the remains of past battles. The shards of lapis lazuli fluttered through the air like flower petals.

On the other side of this field, on top of an eight-track railway, a Legion unit stood like an evil dragon of legend, boasting an incredibly long, menacing body and carrying a gun barrel exceeding thirty meters on its back. Being the greatest weapon employed in the final war against humankind, this railway artillery could be described only as majestic.

Its black armor modules were like a dragon's scales, and the rails that comprised its barrels were like two spears, turning their backs on the sky. There was a blue optical sensor where one would expect its head to be, glowing ominously like a will-o'-the-wisp. Its six close-range armaments—its 40 mm six-barreled revolving autocannon—wavered in a heat haze generated by its previous shots.

Dwarfing even the Dinosauria, the largest of the mass-produced Legion, with an overall height of 110 meters and a total length of over 40 meters, the massive butterfly towered high into the morning sky. Its wings that seemed to be woven of silver threads—probably the components in charge of cooling it down—sprinkled what looked like stardust into the heavens.

This was the Morpho.

The moment Undertaker leaped over the hill, its optical sensor and Vulcan cannon fixed onto it immediately. It had probably lain in wait even after losing Undertaker's signal, and its movements were efficient and swift.

But it wasn't enough.

Undertaker jumped again and stopped suddenly as it landed. Its actuator, which was designed to be sturdy in anticipation of high-maneuver

combat, creaked in effort. The Vulcan cannon, which deployed in the direction it should have moved in order to lock its sights on it, couldn't respond to this sudden action in time.

At the very moment it felt like their gazes intersected, Shin had already locked Undertaker's sights on it and pulled the trigger of his 88 mm cannon.

†

Those movements...!

From the other side of the blue glow emitted by the Edelfalter, Kiriya was faced with the sight of the enemy unit maneuvering with the keen agility of a predator on the hunt. He was left astonished. The enemy made a low, diagonal jump to the back, performing a somersault in midair and landing while changing his bearing, then executing a sudden brake as he landed, to boot.

Even Kiriya, who'd piloted his family's exclusive Feldreß as a descendant to a line of warriors during his lifetime, found it hard to believe there was a human pilot behind those death-defying maneuvers. And in spite of it all, the sights of its 88 mm cannon remained fixed on him the entire time.

The deformed Feldreß moved like lightning, like a white nightmare, like a skeletal corpse prowling in search of its lost head. Below its canopy was the personal mark of a headless skeleton carrying a shovel.

Ah.

Maddened ecstasy mingled with his ice-cold thoughts, and alongside them was a hint of relief.

You made it. You truly were worthy of appearing before me. I expected nothing less.

Kiriya could feel him pulling the trigger. They were separated by two layers of armor and a relative distance of three thousand meters, but Kiriya could sense it vividly.

Anything less than this wouldn't be interesting.

†

"...Still too shallow," Shin whispered, staring at the black smoke issuing from one of the Morpho's armor modules. The shot hadn't fully penetrated it. And there was too much black smoke resulting from that impact.

Explosive reactive armor. It was a unique type of armor that reacted to an anti-tank warhead's explosion by setting off explosives on the armor's surface. It used the blast to disperse the metal jet generated by the warhead and therefore prevent penetration.

The Legion treasured the Morpho. They ignored orthodox theory, which dictated that heavy artillery normally only had armor thick enough to repel shell fragments, and granted it heavy armor on the off chance it would be exposed to a crippling attack.

Anti-tank warheads were no good, then. Which meant high-speed armor-piercing shells wouldn't be effective at their usual range, either.

And yet...this was no different from when he had to face off against Löwe or Dinosauria in that walking aluminum coffin.

The enemy's gaze and malice bore into him. It turned its massive body—which was too heavy to move off the rails—in his direction while its six autocannons rotated toward him as if they had a will of their own.

It was going to shoot. He maneuvered his unit left with movements so reflexive they didn't travel through his mind as thoughts. A muzzle flash followed immediately after, and machine-gun bullets flicked off the ground to Undertaker's right. Sparing it a fleeting look as he repeated the procedure, he dodged a second volley and then jumped away as a third one came hot on his tracks.

The six-barreled Vulcan cannon revolved as it fired. While it was capable of unloading a heavy barrage, this rapidly depleted its bullets and caused it to overheat easily. In other words, it couldn't maintain this rate of fire for long. Undertaker advanced through the momentary lulls in its barrage in a mixture of small, intermittent leaps and emergency brakes that was astounding to behold.

Shin's calm crimson eyes never wavered even as the heavy roars of the cannons echoed down to his core and the whistling of shells cutting through the wind tore into his eardrums. They simply reflected the faint light of his holo-screen: that steady, artificial glow.

The Republic cast the Eighty-Six out onto the battlefield, and the experience they gained there molded them into readily adaptable, hyper-efficient, battle-hardened warriors—albeit with the occasional quirk. So in the midst of combat, any notion of humanity within these children was dampened. Ironically enough, this made them every bit the emotionless combat machines that the Legion were. Fearing their foes simply wasn't an option. And this was especially true for Shin, who specialized in hand-to-hand combat as a vanguard.

In order to slip through the blades of his foes and evade their barrage of bullets, Shin required an extreme level of concentration, which made him lose all grip on his humanity. He suppressed all his conflicts, his anguish, his pain and regrets, along with all other unnecessary thoughts, and buried them at the bottom of his mind, leaving them to fade into oblivion. It was easier that way, so whispered a voice from some corner of his hardened heart. That way, he wouldn't have to think of anything pointless in the middle of battle.

He could forget everything and anything.

It was so terribly...easy.

Some part of him realized the reason behind the madness of this knight standing before him, whose face he'd never known—this ghost, driven crazy by war and slaughter.

How easy would it be...to become like that?

Another lull in the barrage, and Shin changed his line of fire. The Morpho momentarily paused its fire to cool down its machine guns, and Shin shifted his gaze to its left-rear autocannon. The Juggernaut's system automatically traced his gaze's movements and locked onto its target, and he squeezed the trigger just as the reticle inverted into red. No matter how solid the Morpho's armor was, its autocannons couldn't have been fortified.

Hit with an anti-tank warhead to their mechanical section, the Vulcan cannons dispersed. As black flames billowed forth, lightning streaked through the pale sky. The flock of Edelfalter took off, as if startled away, while Undertaker rushed through the blue flocks and the flames it created.

Remaining distance: two thousand meters. The enemy was within range of his main armament, his 88 mm cannon. At this distance, the battle was in no way different from fighting a Löwe or a Dinosauria. The fact that there was no time to escape once they'd been locked onto held just as true for Undertaker's 1,600-meters-per-second cannon as it did for the Morpho's 8,000-meters-per-second railgun.

And once he'd gotten this close, the Vulcan's fire couldn't spread out. The Morpho lacked the destructive mobility the Löwe had, and the absurd size of the turret it prided itself on made it that much easier of a target.

Evading the persistent side-sweeping barrage, Shin closed in on it from the left. The Morpho had three cannons on each side, but if approached from one side, its own massive frame prevented it from shooting at the opposite side. With half of its autocannons sealed, it had to increase the rotation cycle to maintain the same rate of fire. One eventually stopped, apparently having run out of bullets, and another overheated, having not received sufficient time to cool down, and burst in a puff of black smoke.

Relative distance: one thousand meters.

†

Even with the witch's blood running through his veins, he truly was worthy of being called an heir to the Nouzen name—the last of their line. Watching the white Feldreß take advantage of those momentary lulls that could hardly be called pauses to slip through a near ceaseless barrage of quite literally hundreds of shots per second, Kiriya couldn't hold back his admiration.

The coolheadedness to dance upon the razor's edge that separated life from death. And the slyness to seal and shave away Kiriya's own weapons. And there wasn't a hint, not even a sliver of fear clouding any of those actions. If he'd been in the Empire—together with him by his mistress's side—his homeland may have remained as brilliant as it had been in the days of their forefathers.

The strategic decision to capture and utilize this performance by placing it in a commander unit crept into his mind, but Kiriya scoffed at the idea.

Capturing a target alive was much harder than burying it and was that much harder when the opponent was as menacing as this.

The relative distance between them was 1,012 meters. He was moving even closer. His judgment was correct; his 88 mm cannon, smaller than the standardized 120 mm caliber, was incapable of penetrating his armor even at this distance. And yet, the reckless way he approached him... *It was almost as if he was rushing to his death.* It wasn't brave; it was foolhardy.

†

Sitting inside Fido's container, hidden behind a large hill, Frederica watched over the battle with her special ability. When she was in the Empire's fortress, she *saw* the Imperial guard's battles many times, and aside from Kiriya, there were several others among them from the Nouzen clan. But even compared to them all, Shin was exceptional.

The latent prowess passed down through his bloodline and the talent he was born with. Five years struggling against death polished those skills to make him into one of the most skilled warriors in his clan's history, if not the strongest of them all. Had Kiriya still been alive, even with the four-year gap between them, Shin would have probably still been better.

But Kiriya was not human anymore. He was a weapon, equipped with a powerful 4,000 mm barrel, armor much thicker than the Juggernaut's, and Vulcan cannons. And for Undertaker, who specialized in close-quarters combat, he was the worst possible opponent.

Undertaker closed their distance, almost literally slipping through the endless curtain of bullets. A single error in judgment, even one maneuver incorrectly executed, would decide the result of this duel. Just watching it made her heart ache with concern.

“*...Pi.*”

The container rattled as Fido wobbled nervously. Perhaps the faithful Scavenger wished to rush out and help its master in his clash with the giant metallic dragon. Perhaps to expose itself to the enemy's fire in his stead or to serve as a diversion to create an opening for attack. The only thing stopping Fido from doing that was that it had Frederica to keep safe. Because its one and only master had ordered it to bring her back to the Federacy at all costs.

“*...Forgive me.*”

“*Pi.*”

She couldn't help but smile at how its reaction resembled that of an obedient hound, and then she refocused her “eyes.” She had to see *this* through, if nothing else.

And then she realized.

The knights of the Nouzen clans piloted special Feldreß, different from the Vánagandrs, and even tuned them up to suit their individual specifications. Meanwhile, the high-speed, lightly armored Reginleif was an

outlier Feldreß in the Empire's and Federacy's development history, which focused on heavily armored units—high-firepower units.

That held equally true for the unique model piloted by Kiriya. It had thick composite armor, a heavy 120 mm tank turret, and a massive frame and propulsion system to support them. Kiriya's fighting style was based on employing this heavyweight frame with its high-output power packs to trample his opponents.

And she recalled what the boy who'd died the day she'd met him, Shin's comrade, had told her.

Do you know about Shin's legendary zero-point failure?

He tried to get a Vánagandr to jump in a mock battle during combat-maneuvers practice. Got himself disqualified immediately for risky piloting.

But despite it being such an amazing feat of piloting capability, Frederica wasn't surprised to hear of it. Because she already knew someone capable of it...

She leaned forward inadvertently, trying to focus on Kiriya's figure reflected in her mind's eye. Thick armor, capable of blocking the penetration of an 88 mm cannon. A massive 800 mm caliber cannon. An elongated frame capable of supporting them, reminiscent of the form of a dragon. A massive form that required an eight-track railway—four times the number of tracks required for a normal train to move—to withstand its weight.

And still.

This Kiriya was still capable of the same feat...!

“Shinei, no...!”

A long barrel was indeed at a disadvantage if the opponent got to its side. It was easier said than done, of course... But in most cases, a weapon had to pay for its long range by struggling to rotate in close range. Ironically, this Long-Range Artillery type was entrusted to a weapon system of the opposite attribute. And even if it wasn't, Kiriya would never let an opponent take advantage of that weakness...

“You mustn't carelessly get close to him! ...Kiri was, originally, an Operator focused on melee combat, just like you!”

The giant dragon danced about. Its countless pikelike legs kicked against the rail, launching half its massive form high into the air like a serpent raising its head. As it reached its zenith, it twisted its body and turned, falling down into the trails on the opposite side like a wave of metal.

Kicked apart by sharp claws and battered with massive weight, the rails' skeleton—weighing several tons on its own—crumbled, broke apart, and took to the sky. He had destroyed his own means of transportation. Several layers of explosive modules tumbled off his armor. His heavy artillery cannon—never meant to move much at such speeds—likely had its inner mechanisms damaged by this nimble feat.

But in exchange...

...three of its unharmed antiaircraft guns were now turned in Undertaker's direction.

"Wh—?"

Time ground to a near halt as Shin sensed their line of fire fix perfectly on Undertaker. He was in the center of the cross fire. No matter what direction he tried to move in, there was no escape.

As if to make doubly sure, its 800 mm turret, which had remained still until now, swerved in his direction. Electricity crackled at the base of the turret, as if to show off that its charging was complete. From the pitch-black darkness on the other side of the turret's bladelike tips, Shin could hear the familiar sound of agony and hatred...

"Shin! Get back!"

And in the next moment, something impacted against the surface of the Morpho's turret. A fuse set off and burst. Caught by surprise, the massive beast's turret wavered as further autocannon fire assailed it. Using its remaining left legs and a wire anchor to climb up the hill, Wehrwolf fired at full-auto. The Morpho's consciousness shifted toward him.

Stay out of this, nuisance.

Its irritation was palpable. With bullets ricochetting off its body, the Morpho's heavy main armament swerved in Wehrwolf's direction with ominous churning, growling sounds issuing from its inner mechanisms. Having finished revolving, the turret belched fire in what wasn't so much a roar as it was a sheer shock wave. Taking a direct hit, Wehrwolf was blown away from the top of the hill. Shin couldn't tell if Raiden got away in time or not.

In the brief moment that the cannons' sights turned away from him, Undertaker escaped the Vulcan cannons' line of fire, but the three machine guns deployed once again, tracking his movements. With eighteen gun barrels and the fire of an arc discharge on his tail, Shin had to retreat to avoid the line of fire sweeping him down from the side. It was the Morpho's weapon control system. Once it had locked onto the target, its antiair machine guns tracked and aimed at it automatically for as long as their effective radius allowed.

Their relative distance was once again widened to one thousand meters. The three machine guns he'd supposedly conquered and the Morpho's main armament remained intact.

This...

An icy smile inadvertently played over Shin's lips.

This...could be checkmate.

But contrary to this creeping thought, Shin's frozen eyes scoured the situation, busily groping for an avenue of approach as his combat instincts awakened in full force. The Vulcan cannons began revolving again after pausing for a moment to cool down their machinery.

As he fought as if dancing on thin ice, in the span of a moment that felt as long as an eternity... Just as he got into position to shoot, to cut a path to the enemy, at that very moment...

Suddenly.

A new Resonance target connected to his Para-RAID.

†

The Federacy's RAID Device was developed based on the quasi-nerve-device data taken from the data tag of the ear cuff model implanted into Shin's and his friends' bodies. Their connection-target settings were wiped when their Republic military records were erased, but if they were merely deleted, restoring the lost data wasn't all that difficult.

Those restored settings were stealthily reinstalled onto the Eighty-Six's RAID Devices on a playful whim by the researchers. No one from the Republic would ever think to Resonate with them anyway, and no one would notice it was there. It was merely a joke, done in honor of the device's original developers.

But settings were settings. And given the right conditions, they would still work as intended.

For example, if someone was to set their Resonance targets to all possible recipients in range other than themselves, the Sensory Resonance would activate...

†

"To all Juggernauts along the fortress walls!"

Shin didn't recognize the owner of the voice at the time. As the RAID Devices were developed differently, the voice, which would have been perfectly clear under normal conditions, crackled with static and noise.

"Direction 120, distance 8,000, load armor-piercing rounds—Fire!"

In the next moment, the Morpho's entire body was impacted with explosions. It wasn't the destructive blasts of 155 mm and 203 mm artillery fire, which would peel away light armor and destroy with just their shock waves. These impacts came from smaller, weaker, low-caliber rounds. But the sheer number of firing lines was astounding. How many cannons did whoever ordered this deploy to shoot such a barrage of concentrated fire? These rapid, low-flying warheads traveling almost parallel to the ground at a speed beyond the perception of human kinetic vision were probably fired concurrently from countless tank turrets.

Having destroyed the tracks—its only means of movement—the sluggish beast could only sit idly by as it was showered with cannon fire. The anti-armor rounds boring into the Morpho weren't capable of penetrating its heavy armor, but it stiffened as if snapping out of a slumber when the consecutive fire and fragments set off its own reactive armor.

**"Resume fire and, in case of a counterattack, dodge at your own discretion!
Unidentified unit!"**

It was a one-sided, extremely vague query, but Shin somehow realized it was referring to Undertaker.

"You're trying to close in on it, aren't you? We'll hold it at bay, so take the chance to attack!"

Bombardment fire. Its shock waves and flames. The blast issuing from the reactive armor. The countless persistent, heavy flashes and impacts. These all stunned the Morpho's central processor made of liquid micromachines, blanking out its ground-to-ground antiair radar for a moment. As if aiming for that opening, a short-range missile flew into the sky above the Morpho. The shell's fuse triggered and burst. Self-forging projectiles rushed down on the Morpho like a rain of spears, penetrating its armor, its remaining Vulcan cannons, and its countless segmented legs.

For the first time, the massive beast lost its balance. Its massive steel body bent back in what looked like anguish and then crashed. Without its legs' buffering systems softening the impact, the ground quaked with a heavy thud.

"All units, hold your fire! Now's your chance!"

Shin didn't need to be told. Just as the missile burst, he spurred Undertaker on at maximum speed. Covering the shortest distance between them in little over ten seconds, he somersaulted as the Morpho turned its railgun toward him in a last-ditch effort, finally reaching the range for melee combat, his field of expertise.

Suddenly, chills ran down his spine like a jolt of electricity.

Reflexively pulling back his control sticks, his unit braked suddenly. It wasn't foresight or prediction, merely a movement compelled by a feeling his opponent still had a card up its sleeve. Shin didn't have the time to move any more than that. As his line of sight tipped upward in vain, the footage on his main screen shifted, filling up with silver.

†

Don't underestimate me...!

Even as his entire body seethed, mangled by the sudden shower of flames, Kiriya wouldn't stop fighting. The armor covering his body shivered as he forced in commands to shake off the explosive shell fragments and self-forging fragments biting into his armor.

I can still fight. Even if I have to take them all down with me, I can still—still kill every single one of them!

Why?

An oddly calm voice drifted into his consciousness. It was Kiriya's own voice from four years ago, when he still had a body capable of maturing. From when, while it had already deepened a long time ago, his voice was

still higher than a full-grown adult's. His voice from four years ago, perfectly unchanged.

Why do you go this far? Why do you fight so much? Why do you...try to slaughter everyone like that? Even your last remaining kinsman, who you've never met?

Kiriya laughed, even without lips to curl upward or a throat to produce sound.

Isn't it obvious? It's because fighting is all I have left. The only thing available to me is to throw myself headfirst into this burning battlefield. Nothing else remains to quell the emptiness in my core, in what might be called my soul, but the flames of war and endless conflict.

Catching sight of the enemy reflected on his optical sensor, Kiriya swung toward its cockpit. As a countless flurry of side blows (that would no doubt make a saner person flinch) assaulted his flank, he struck at his last kinsman recklessly, as if to say nothing else mattered anymore. Not even his own life.

If it'll make you...

Those unconscious words bubbled out suddenly, from beyond his seething thoughts.

You, who have nothing, just like me...

If it makes you into what I am, *I'll do anything...*

†

The source of the silvery deluge was the snapping of countless wires. The Morpho's four wings spread open, their wires reaching out like a silver torrent that rushed forward at lightning speed. From the massive dragon's perspective, they were strands of hair, but each of the cables was as thick as a child's arm.

Whipping down, they gouged deep into the ground, perhaps drilling into it with their pointed tips. The dirt flew into the air, skimming the area right before Undertaker, which braked suddenly as it all began to transpire. Mud splashed from the ground, clinging to his right pile driver.

And then—

“...!”

After a purple light flashed before his eyes, shocks ran through Shin's body. Every single optical screen, holo-window, and gauge in Undertaker whited out. Undertaker was thrown back, staggered by electricity traveling through the ground, and Shin barely managed to prevent the machine from toppling over.

His main screen flickered back to life, and several gauges likewise returned to normal. But the holo-windows wouldn't recover, and some of the gauges still displayed random figures, their alert lamps lighting up. And as the scent of some of the parts burning up filled his sealed cockpit...

...he looked up to find the Morpho's countless extended wires creeping in from all directions, with the main body hidden between them. These were wires for close-quarters combat... The Legion were so wary of losing the Morpho, they'd equipped it with countermeasures for every possible scenario.

A tank turret, developed and designed with the intent of concentrating its power to a minimal point in order to penetrate the enemy's thick armor, was a bad option to blow away the countless wires at once. The uneven grid of wires piercing the ground seemed to possess an irregular pattern, but it actually didn't have a single gap large enough for the Juggernaut to slip through, and any attempt to tear through them would likely result only in them coiling tightly around him.

"Capacitor overload confirmed... Those are conduction wires. What an ugly weapon..."

The voice on the other side of the line was thick with tension and anxiety. It looked like they hadn't anticipated this, either.

"Avoid contact with the wires. They're coursing with the electricity powering that gigantic thing and its railgun. Your weapon and propulsion systems likely won't be able to take it... This isn't an obstacle someone like you, who's focused on close-quarters combat, can conquer."

Then what am I supposed to do?

He didn't actually put that question into words, but it seemed the person on the other side nodded.

"In which case—?"

At that moment, the owner of the voice on the other side of the lines seemed to have narrowed their eyes coldly, as a tinge of true, awe-inspiring fighting spirit, as sharp as a blade, filled their voice.

"We'll do something about this."

Just then, another missile sailed into the air. Several wires bended and warped like whips, slapping the approaching projectile away from the side. Attacked from both sides, the missile was cut into round slices. But what spilled from within it weren't solid explosives or rocket fuel, but large amounts of a muddy, highly viscous liquid.

As the liquid dispersed into the air, gravity took effect, causing it to rain down on the Morpho. The Morpho's black armor and wires were drenched in brown as the liquid clung to them stubbornly.

And then:

"—Five seconds... Two, one... Ignition."

A timed fuse activated. The combustible liquid caught fire within seconds and flared up.

_____ ?!

A silent scream shook the air as well as the Morpho's own body as the flames began consuming it. It was almost like an odd sort of revenge for the Legion's previous tactic of smoking them out using fire earlier—a bombardment by way of incendiary bombs. The Morpho writhed, unable to

move with its rails destroyed and its legs lost. Its remaining jointed legs missed the tracks and stomped into the ground, sinking into the quagmire beneath as it was incapable of supporting its weight of over one thousand tons.

Unlike humans, who burned to death after being exposed to flames of a few hundred degrees Celsius, the Legion's body consisted of metal capable of withstanding even this inferno of 1,300 degrees. The thick armor prevented the heat from penetrating the machine's internal mechanisms, and it didn't have pilots who would choke from the oxygen burning away.

And still, the human instincts that remained within the metallic dragon made it tremble in fear of the fire. As it burned within the combustible fluid's flames, the electricity running through the wires petered out. Its circuitry went into emergency shutdown due to exposure to high temperatures, and the sudden exposure to the heat lowered the metal wires' conductivity. Having lost their ability to conduct electricity, the wires were reduced to nothing but thin cords.

Retracted as the dragon writhed and roared soundlessly, the wires were ejected from the ground one after another, flicking into the air. The flames hungrily lapped at the bluish-purple dawn, reducing everything to chaos. And as that happened, Shin pushed his control sticks forward.

The Morpho's blue optical sensor swerved in Undertaker's direction as it leaped toward it as if being launched. Focusing on it, all the wires bore down on it at once, their talon-like tips curved toward their prey as they bore down on it with an arc. Shin looked up to the heavens for a single moment before the wires swung down. They were the same wires that had cut down a guided missile like butter a moment ago.

He could hear someone call for him from the wireless:

"It's still moving...?! That's no good! Please! Dodge it!"

...No.

Shin's crimson eyes perceived each wire as the storm of slashes crashed down on him, each from a different angle and launched at a slightly different time. His concentration reached its peak in a moment that seemed to last forever. He was aware of which wires would stand in the route he would make toward the Morpho—and how to avoid or cut through them. The wires were still burning, their conductivity still lost. And that made them nothing more than a slightly agile enemy.

He took a low, sharp leap forward. The first slash bore down on the silvery Feldreß. They intersected, and the blade it swung at the last second cut through the wire horizontally. The momentum of his landing kept him flying straight forward, allowing him to evade the second slash and cut through it as he did. The third and fourth came at him diagonally from both sides, and he intercepted both from their opposite directions and went on to clear away the remaining spears in quick succession as he rushed forward.

Small-caliber projectiles slipped through the deluge of spear-like wires one after another, forming parabolas as they soared through the sky, their

timed fuses bursting in midair. The shock waves generated by the countless blasts occurring below the slashing wires formed an invisible shield that deflected them away from Undertaker.

Undertaker rushed onward under their protection, dodging another slash by using one of the artillery turrets thrust into the ground like grave markers as a foothold to jump into the air. But forcing him into the foolish act of jumping into the air, where he didn't have the freedom of movement to dodge, was the Morpho's plan, and it brought down a splitting blow on him.

Yeah... He really is the type I'd never be able to stand.

So Shin thought, recalling an exchange he once had with Frederica.

Such a fundamentally straightforward person is someone I could never put up with. He seems so fixated on flaunting the part of him that's inherently and irreparably broken, as if to say I'm just as distorted as he is.

It makes me sick.

He fired a wire anchor. As the anchor dug into the Morpho's burnt armor, Shin coiled it back, descending in what wasn't a free fall, but a speed that was closer to crashing. With the slash grazing his right blade's fixture, blowing it clean off, making it the sole sacrifice, he landed on the massive dragon's back.

"Frederica... Where is your knight?"

He asked her this unnecessary question, because shooting down her knight was her wish and desire. Even if he would be the one pulling the trigger in practice, it was up to Frederica to work up the resolve to commit the deed.

He could feel her shivering beyond the Resonance.

".....Kiri...is..."

For a moment, Frederica saw a vision.

At the front garden of the Adler Holst—the palace of the old Imperial throne, which she lacked the experience to feel nostalgic for—clad in the empire's black-and-red uniform, stood Kiriya, scolding someone in his usual straitlaced manner.

The subject of his scolding was a red-eyed boy of mixed blood with a similar physique to his own, albeit several years younger, who was ignoring his elder's prattling with a disinterested expression. That only made Kiriya's shouting grow even louder, and an intellectual young man in glasses—the boy's older brother—stepped in to mediate between the two.

It was a sight that had never transpired in reality.

Frederica's ability allowed her to gaze only at the past and present. Which meant this was nothing but a construct of her wishes, an illusion. But if...if only this war had never happened. If only the joining of the Nouzens' heir and a Pyrope woman, the mixing of their races, hadn't been forbidden, leading them to flee to the Republic. If only that tradition hadn't existed.

If only the Empire had been a bit kinder to its own people, to other countries, to their fellow citizens...

...perhaps this sight would have been possible. And she was the final descendant to the line that could make that happen.

The young empress bit her pink lips.

If that's the case...I know what I must do from here on.

"Kiriya is..."

Her hesitation lasted for only a moment. Frederica chose not to flee from the resolve needed to kill someone precious to her.

"Behind the main turret. In the gap between the first pair of wings."

Looking around the back of the massive Legion he had clung to, his gaze fell on a maintenance hatch sticking out of the point she'd designated. Cutting even more wires extending from the root of the wings, he ran past pillars of napalm fire. The Morpho roared, its legs kicking wildly like a centipede that had vinegar poured on it. As it jolted its heavy one-thousand-ton body, its writhing nearly sent the lightweight Juggernaut flying.

"Tch...!"

Spreading out his four legs, he also activated his pile drivers. The piles dug into the Morpho's armor forcefully, and in exchange for a powerful jolt that made even Shin—accustomed as he was to high-mobility maneuvering—clench his teeth in agony, Undertaker was fixed and stabilized to the machine's back.

Meanwhile, the Morpho writhed and raged, swerving and turning its turret upward like an animal challenging the gods. It had charged its railgun with more electricity than ever before—enough to be on the verge of rampaging. The shock wave tore through the air as lightning ran through the barrel. Shin's eyes opened wide as he realized what it intended to do.

Mutually assured destruction.

It was going to take Shin down with it...!

The emotion that rushed through him at that moment was...oddly enough, neither terror nor regret, but overwhelming relief.

So this.

This is the end.

A gentle, far-too-weak *bang* echoed across the battlefield, silencing all else. The source of that sound was a pistol's gunfire. It was far outside its effective range, and even if it had hit, it lacked the power to penetrate the Legion's armor—a final weapon meant for no other purpose than to end one's own life.

The Legion instincts that ordered Kiriya to exterminate all possible elements spurred his cracked optical sensor to swerve her way. Likewise, the Juggernaut's system recognized it as an undefined armed target and zoomed in on it automatically.

Frederica stood there, surrounded by the flock of blue butterflies, with pistol in hand. Her pale lips parted:

"Kiri..."

And at that moment, the metallic dragon undoubtedly gazed at his mistress, his empress.

"Princess."

His voice was thick with deep, profound relief.

Frederica then lowered the muzzle of the gun slowly and pointed it at her temple.

Why...? Art you not coming to stop me, dear knight of mine? I will die if you do not. I stand here, where the fires of your suicide will claim me. I will extinguish your flames with my own flesh and blood...

"Princess!"

The Morpho's murderous impulses faded away like mist for a single moment. The thunder running through the barrel subsided.

And in that moment, Shin pulled the trigger.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Fido rushing in and skillfully grabbing Frederica with its crane arm. Not even sparing a moment to throw her into the container, it turned around and sped away with all its might.

Percussion, followed by impact. A high-speed, armor-piercing warhead charged with a massive amount of kinetic energy penetrated the Morpho's armor and inner mechanisms, frying its central processor with the intensity of heat unique to depleted uranium. The Morpho's interior burst into flames.

" _____ !"

The Morpho roared as its liquid-micromachine brain boiled and seethed. Shin grimaced as the roar rattled his eardrums. Black flames spewed forth from the gigantic beast, reducing its liquid micromachines to silvery ash. The sight of it reminded Shin of his brother's death all too vividly. His brother, whose final words never truly reached him before he disappeared. His brother's disappearing hand, his disappearing words, which Shin failed to grasp in time.

Trapped in the Morpho's confines, Frederica's knight wailed. His final words, his hatred for all life, were truly a cry out to the person he had always sought.

Princess.

Princess.

Princess.

I've finally met you once again, but...!

"...That's enough."

Shin whispered, knowing those words would never reach him. Just as he could never grasp his brother's retreating, burning hand. Just as his brother's voice had faded away, never to echo in his ears again.

The dead were the past. There was no changing their passing, and the coming of the future washed them away regardless of one's desire. The living could never cross paths with them again.

"Even if you linger, nothing will come of it. You'll get nowhere. So just... disappear."

At that moment, Shin felt black eyes on him. And the gaze was somehow full of pity.

That's...just as true for you. You, who, like me, has nothing. No... It's even truer for you.

After all...didn't you just try to die along with me?

When Shin came to, *that* was standing right in front of him. A chill ran through his body. They had the same face. Maybe it was because Shin had never seen his distant relative's face that he imagined his own in its place, or maybe they truly were that similar. Enough for Frederica to mix the two together as many times as she did.

Or maybe...that wasn't Frederica's knight anymore...

Fixing his black eyes—the only thing that set the two apart—on Shin, he sneered cruelly. The color of a new moon. The same color as his brother's eyes on that fateful night long ago.

Right. You have nothing.

Nothing to protect. Nowhere to return to. Nothing to aspire to or live for. No one to call for in your final hour. Not a one. Not a single...

...reason to live.

The phantom extending its hands gripped his neck. They weren't his brother's arms, but they probably weren't Kiriya's, either. Those fingers, which were hard from the use of firearms and piloting an armored weapon, were Shin's own...

The hand gripping his throat stabbed its nails into the scar his brother had carved into it... The only thing he had left of him, the sole proof of his brother's existence.

The black eyes sneered.

Didn't you cheat death just to gun him down? Weren't you kept alive for that sole purpose? So now that you've accomplished that...

...you're unnecessary.

You have no reason to stay alive, no matter where you are.

So why...?

Why are you still alive?

They sneered.

You hoped everything would end once you killed it, didn't you? You were so sure it would. And in the end, once again...

...you're all alone.

"...!"

A vision flashed before his eyes. He saw his brother's retreating back clad in a camouflage uniform, a Juggernaut blown away, and the final expressions of the countless comrades he'd had to shoot dead since there was no saving them anymore.

Why...? Why does everyone...always die...?

And leave me behind...?



The Legion abhorred the idea of secret information leaking in the event of their capture, and so they took many countermeasures to prevent that, such as powerful encryption and blow-off panels. And that held all the more true for the Morpho, their precious ace in the hole. A special sensor detected the fatal damage to its central processor, triggering a self-destruct device via an independent circuit.

It wasn't triggered with the intent of taking anyone else down with it, but it was a blast from a highly explosive charge powerful enough to obliterate an over-one-thousand-ton Goliath and its thirty-meter barrel. It burned down the flock of butterflies fluttering nearby, scorched the top of Fido's container as it leaned over Frederica to shield the girl it carried from the blast, and blew Undertaker—still on top of the machine—away like a leaf playing in the wind.

†

Apparently, he'd lost consciousness for only a brief moment. When he opened his eyes, he could see the dawn sky displayed over his cracked optical screen. Looking up made an odd sense of claustrophobia wash over him, prompting him to push the canopy's release lever down. He knew there was nothing out there to threaten him, and even if there was, he didn't much care right now.

Perhaps the frame was bent out of shape, because the canopy was stuck a bit before popping open, but the blue sky that spread out before him felt just as oppressive and heavy as the one he saw through the corrected image displayed through the computer. A shining azure that felt like it could come crashing down at any second, crushing everything under its weight. Shin heaved a deep sigh and leaned his head against the headrest, closing his eyes.

For some reason he felt awfully...tired.

To keep moving forward was his pride. To fight on until their dying breath was the Eighty-Six's chosen identity, and that was what had carried him this far. But maybe he was simply wandering the first ward's battlefield, searching for the right place to die after burying his brother. He wished for the mechanical ghosts to put an end to him, a mere ghost who couldn't even die properly, the way his brother couldn't.

If only you weren't around.

That was what his brother had once told him—something countless people had since repeated. But still he lived, because he had the objective of putting his brother's ghost to rest. He could tolerate and forgive the fact that he lived on because he had to free his brother's soul. And once he'd lost that, there was no more reason for him to live.

You still have a long life ahead of you.

Those were the final words, the truly final words he'd heard his brother speak. The words of a posthumous separation that came far too late and

truly never should have happened. Words that were a parting gift. His brother sincerely loathed to part with him and prayed his future would be a happy one from the bottom of his heart.

But to Shin, that could not have been anything but a curse.

Such a long time. Such a long future he would have to suffer through. He'd never once wished for that. He had truly looked forward to the moment he would face his brother, and it would all end as they took each other out. And despite that...

Brother... Why did you leave me behind again? Why couldn't you take me with you this time...?

If only you did that, I wouldn't have to feel this way...

"Nng..."

Something like a feral growl, like weeping, escaped his lips. He covered his eyes with a hand, feeling something hot coalesce behind his eyelids. But nothing came... *Reaper*. He'd never once thought that alias to be detestable. He would carry the memories of his departed comrades with him, and he never regretted making the promise to bring them along.

But why...? Why does everyone leave me behind? Why do they leave me all alone...? Why does everyone...so easily...so arbitrarily...disappear...?

He thought he could hear someone cry out, asking to not be left behind. And if he could only say those words himself...would someone, anyone, stay by his side?

He looked to the flaming wreckage of the Morpho. The final resting place of Frederica's knight. The man he'd never met in his lifetime, who'd been so much like Shin but so unlike him as well. The remains of what had once been a ghost with no blood relations, with no land to call his home, who could exist only on the battlefield.

And at the same time, the ultimate fate of a ghost who, despite having become Legion, always had someone to long for. If Shin were to become Legion, whose name would he call? He had no one to cry out to. And that felt all too...hollow.

Hearing the patter of light footsteps approaching, Shin looked up with annoyance. Running through the scattered fragments of lapis lazuli littering the area, Frederica rested her hands on the edge of his cockpit and peeked inside.

"You look like a cadaver in its casket. It's incredibly ominous."

Shin scoffed weakly behind closed eyes. The sealed cockpit truly did feel like a casket, and the scattered remains of lapis lazuli were like burial flowers adorning it.

"...Right."

"What manner of answer is that, you fool...? When will you stop pushing yourself so hard?"

She tried to smile but made no attempt to hide her red, swollen eyelids or the tear marks that trailed down her porcelain cheeks. Frederica's

shoulders remained perked up for only a moment before she sighed, sagging them again.

"Forgive me... The handgun you entrusted me with..."

Looking down to her small, shivering hands, Shin noticed a large crack running down from the ejection port to the frame ahead of it. It was probably hit with shrapnel. The crack likely extended from the interior of the chamber to the barrel, fatal damage for a gun.

"...Yeah."

Even after coming as far as the Federacy, this pistol that buried his dying comrades was the one thing he never parted with. But oddly enough, he didn't feel any particular emotions wash over him now. He took it from her with one hand and chucked it into the distance. The lump of metal and reinforced resin made a dull sound as it landed between the remains of countless blue butterflies. Frederica's eyes traced its trajectory with surprise.

"...Y-you did not have to throw it away."

"The cylinder and barrel are cracked, and it's not a Federacy model, so I can't have it fixed."

It was used by the old Republic ground forces, but its model was originally produced by one of the Alliance's weapon manufacturers. If he was to seriously search, perhaps he could find parts to have it repaired, but he wasn't that attached to it.

Frederica nervously looked down at where Shin's pistol had fallen.

"Why...? Was it not the pistol that put your dying comrades to rest? Is it not, then, proof of your bond with them? You needn't let go of it just because it is broken."

He couldn't help but laugh at those hollow words. *Bond?*

"I don't mind... In the end, I was only using them as an excuse to return to the battlefield."

Even as he promised to bring them with him...he merely wandered around, seeking a place to die. They wouldn't want to be taken on such a pitiful, ridiculous journey with him.

"That's—!"

Frederica's expression contorted into a pained grimace as she raised her voice.

"That's wrong...! You did not shoulder that weight for such a reason..."

"..."

"What was it you just let go of? I cannot help but think...that the promise you made with your comrades, what you felt when you made that oath, pains you right now..."

Transparent droplets trickled down her pale cheeks, reflecting the light of dawn.

"Your heart has frozen over so much, the heat of the emotions you feel for your comrades can only come across as pain. It hurts. But if the pain

becomes too much to bear, you need only rely on others... You having no one to help shoulder your burdens is a thing of the past..."

He narrowed his eyes, hearing her speak as if she knew things he'd never mentioned to her. Given her ability, having her see into his past to some extent was unavoidable—Shin wasn't capable of controlling his own power, either, after all—but hearing her speak like she knew everything was unpleasant.

"...Sneaking a peek again?"

"Fool. It's because you keep thinking of the departed... You may claim to have let go of them, but you carry them with you still, which is why I can see them. There were so many, but you faced them head-on, never once turning away from any of them... How can you write them off as an excuse, you idiot?"

Wiping her eyes roughly with the knuckles of her clenched fist, she turned to face Fido, which was waiting on them a short distance away.

"Fido, go and retrieve the gun this fool threw away. I'll help you look, so surely the two of us will find it."

"Don't move, Fido. We don't have the time to waste on that."

Fido's optical sensor flickered, as if its eyes were spinning from the conflicting orders. But after giving an inquiring beep, for some reason, it reached out to Frederica, grabbing her by the collar like a kitten and tossing her into the cockpit.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"We're taking you back, obviously. With this much damage, if new enemies show up, we'll be in trouble."

They were still far off, but he could feel Legion who had noticed the disturbance begin moving in their direction. All four of his pile drivers were lost, and warning indicators wouldn't stop flashing, alerting him that the propulsion system was strained by his unreasonable maneuvers. He may not have cared much about dying, but he had to bring Frederica back. He had to check to be sure of it, but the Federacy military's main force should be advancing on their position. If he could just avoid combat long enough to regroup with them...

...And then what? It took him only a moment to realize how foolish a question that was. The war with the Legion wasn't over. It would continue after this. And he would fight on in that war...until the day he eventually lost and died. And as for why he fought... What he had to fight for... That was a question he could never answer. A question he had always subconsciously avoided answering.

What would Eugene say if, at the time, he had answered his question by telling him he was fighting to die? If that was what he was fighting for, it wasn't Eugene who should have died back then... It was him.

He was pulled out of his brooding when he felt Frederica's small body hugging him.

"...What is it now?"

"Do not speak to me like that, fool... When we regroup with the main force, take a leave of absence and rest. Or else, soon enough, you will..."

Against his own body—cold from the chill of early morning in the northern climate—Frederica's had the kind of warmth unique to a child, and that was even more irritating to him. But somehow, he couldn't bring himself to tear her away from him, and he looked up into the sky. A part of him wished from the bottom of his heart that it would fall on him.

The sun rose, and a flock of butterflies flew away, fluttering their wings as if banished by the morning light. The lapis lazuli wind surged for a moment. A nacre glow filled his field of vision and then scattered upward, as if inhaled by the heavens.

It was said that butterflies, regardless of culture, region, or age, are the symbol of the souls of the departed, returning home—

He'd extended his hand subconsciously, but his fingers naturally caught nothing but air. He could only look up in vain at the blue glimmer fading into the sky...

Sighing once, he activated the cockpit's sealing system. The canopy closed down. An indicator lit up, signifying the cockpit was airtight. Unlike the Republic's Juggernaut, the Federacy model's cockpit was set to protect its pilot from biological/chemical weapons. He reactivated the main system, which had gone into standby mode. The information holo-windows were finally restored and turned on, and the blackened optical screen lit up.

As his optical screen flickered on, it was suddenly filled with crimson light.

Red petals fluttered through the wind. It was as if the lycoris flowers, which had been almost trampled by the flock of blue butterflies, had extended their petals and stamens in a radial pattern, all raising their unique crimson stems at once.

The entire field was filled with the flowers. It was a sea of lycoris growing en masse, dyed in a shade of red characteristic to these flowers, which, depending on the season, were sometimes completely free of petals. As the wind blew through them, they rustled like some kind of inaudible monster. Petals that were torn apart by robotic legs fluttered about ephemerally in the red world that spread as far as the eye could see.

And at some point, she appeared, gasping for air. There stood a girl clad in a blue military uniform, her eyes and hair a brilliant shade of silver.



†

The white flash tearing through the moonless dawn could be seen in the Gran Mur's interception cannon's control room monitor.

Lena walked across the crimson carpet of lycoris, stopping before the unidentified Feldreß sitting with its legs buried beneath the flowers. It was a type that was probably conceptually different from the Republic's Feldreß. It had four jointed, nimble legs, and its streamlined, aerodynamic frame was in the color of polished bone.

It was equipped with an 88 mm cannon on its gun-mount arm and had high-frequency blades on both sides—one of them currently broken. It had a functional beauty distinctive of a highly efficient weapon. The cold, ferocious beauty of a sword or a spear forged and tempered for the sake of true combat.

And yet...why? For some reason, it reminded her of the Juggernaut. It gave the ominous impression of a skeleton prowling the battlefield, searching for its lost head.

There was no telling if it was friend or foe. For all she knew, it could be a new type of Legion. But if nothing else, it was an enemy of that Long-Range Artillery type—the Legion that had shattered the Gran Mur.

That was why she'd given it covering fire. Whoever it was, they'd offered no response, but they'd fought together to defeat their common enemy, and when she'd seen the Long-Range Artillery type self-destruct in an attempt to take the Feldreß with it, she'd rushed out to confirm its status.

The pilot—if there indeed was someone piloting this craft—could've been seriously injured. And even if not, she wanted to extend a word of thanks for their aid. Even though the minefields on the path to the Gran Mur had been broken through, they were still a dangerous zone in terms of military safety standards, with only 80 percent of the mines removed. She had been picked up by Cyclops's Juggernaut and carried all the way here.

Staring at the unknown Feldreß standing there silently through the Juggernaut's optical sensor, Cyclops's Processor, Captain Shiden Iida, parted her lips to speak.

"You should bail in case anything happens, Your Majesty. If you run around the battlefield unprotected like this, you'll only get in the way."

"No. Besides, there's no guarantee something will happen."

She drew closer just as the unidentified craft rose to its feet. It seemed the pilot, or perhaps the craft itself, hadn't taken so much damage it couldn't move. Her gaze fell on the personal mark of a headless skeleton carrying a shovel drawn on the armor's flank. Shiden gave an unusually surprised "Ah..."

"It can't be...?! No, but that's..."

"Captain Iida?"

"Don't you realize that's...? Ah, that's right. You never did actually see it, did you...?"

"...?"

Shiden then fell silent. The unidentified craft's red optical sensor turned their way.

A silver-haired girl stood in the sea of red flowers. The cuffs of her blue raised-collar uniform were burnt and torn. A large, clumsy assault rifle dangled from her slender shoulder. Her eyes were the same silvery hue as her hair, now matted with soot.

It was the appearance he'd seen plenty of times, despite not wanting to see it then or ever again. Once a month, during air transports. On transfers to new posts. The Republic. The ones who drove the Eighty-Six out into the battlefield, transferred them to more severe battlefields if they survived, and eventually ordered them to die.

That glittering hair fluttering in the gentle breeze. That lustrous appearance. Shin's breath caught in his throat as the young girl—whose face he couldn't quite make out—somehow overlapped with the appearance of a boy his age, clad in a steel-blue uniform.

You should have died instead.

Averting his eyes promptly, he held his breath once again when his gaze then fell on a black-armored Juggernaut—the same kind of faulty aluminum coffin he'd once piloted in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And behind that, he made out the hazy outlines of a gray artificial concrete structure... The Gran Mur.

A faint smile found its way to his lips.

He'd intended to advance as far as he could, but apparently, he'd been going around in circles and ended up back where it all began.

Frederica stiffened as she looked up at him, and Shin pretended he wasn't aware of how pained his expression was when he opened the Feldreß's communications.

†

"...May I assume you're a commander of the Republic of San Magnolia's military?"

Perhaps because of the damage it had sustained while fighting the Long-Range Artillery type earlier, the audio of its outer speaker was cracked and hard to pick up. The pilot spoke with a curt, blunt, and dry tone.

"That is correct. And you are...?"

"I am a member of the Federal Republic of Giad's 177th Armored Division."

Contrary to its courteous statement, the tone of that voice felt terribly distant. If she was to take this person's affiliation to be truth, it would mean he—she inferred he was male from his voice, as distorted and broken as it was—was from the military personnel of Giad, which was an enemy country of theirs a decade ago.

There was probably some sort of political uprising that led to their changing the name of their country, and it seemed they were common enemies of the Legion. But that in and of itself didn't mean they would see a Republic military officer as an ally. He didn't give away his name or rank, probably to maintain military secrecy... The Eighty-Six didn't tell the Republic citizens their names unless explicitly asked, though, so she'd stopped seeing it as disrespectful.

"I've acted out this operation to eliminate the Morpho—the railgun-equipped Legion—in order to protect the Federacy's defensive line. I am grateful for your assistance in the operation."

"No thanks are necessary... But is it just you? You broke through the Legion's territory all on your own? Why were you ordered on such a terrible operation...?"

"—"

The silence she got in return somehow felt terribly cold. Lena noticed Shiden stifling a chuckle over the Resonance and clicked her tongue. A solo mission, or perhaps a small group, advancing through Legion territories... The survivors of the first defensive wards of each front of the Republic were sent on such Special Reconnaissance missions at the end of their service terms, for the purpose of being exterminated. What right did she have to call something similar "terrible"...?

"...Your concern is appreciated, but the western front's main force is advancing on this position from behind. I should have no trouble regrouping with them."

"I...see. That's goo—"

"Would you like to come with us?"

"Eh?"

"If it's only a small number of personnel, I believe the main force will be able to offer you protection."

Contrary to the nature of his offer, the pilot's voice was extremely detached and businesslike. He spoke as if he could tell how, for over two months, the Republic had been in a state of constant turmoil, with its defensive line pushed back and its sphere of influence and military power diminishing greatly. And he asked them if they were willing to run away on their own. But his tone was a hollow one, without a shred of ridicule or insult.

At the same time, he spoke to her as one would to a puzzled child they found, who had walked so long and so hard that they became exhausted and lost their way. And that annoyed her a little. As if he had arbitrarily decided that they wouldn't be willing to fight anyway and was mocking them for it.

"No. I cannot abandon this country and the comrades who fight under me. Even if we never win and only defeat awaits us...I will continue to fight."

The Federacy officer chuckled faintly at Lena's declaration.

Shin couldn't hold back a snicker at those excessive words. Fight? The Republic's military personnel, who shut themselves up behind their walls

until their homeland came to ruin? No, there was an even more fundamental question here.

"What for?"

He was surprised there were any survivors, but the Republic was probably ruined all the same. The only things they could scrape together to attack a long-range tactical weapon were a scarce few interception cannons and the Juggernauts' low-range fire, and judging by her rank insignia, this girl was only a lieutenant. A junior on-site commander who wasn't even on a field officer's level. Whatever scarce fighting capability and manpower the Republic's military did have were reduced to almost nothing over these two months.

...If the major survived, would she be here now?

The thought crossed his mind, but he shook his head, telling himself there was no point in asking himself that. Whatever the case, they had neither reason nor need to fight, nor the power to do so. And still, this girl said they would fight? For what?

"Are you rushing to your deaths...? If that's the case, you would've been better off not fighting back at all."

He couldn't hold back a voiceless laugh of disdain as he spoke. Just *who*, exactly, was he directing those words to?

"If that's the case, you would've been better off not fighting back at all."

Lena clenched her fists at the sound of that cold, blunt question that teetered between ridicule and self-deprecation.

"Even if we don't have the power to do it..."

Is he implying that the powerless shouldn't fight? That it's meaningless, and they mustn't try to cling to life? Impossible.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Cyclops, the Juggernaut standing all too brittle and weak in comparison to the Federacy's unit. There were people who fought to the bitter end, knowing they could never survive, with only their machines as their sole partners and final resting places. Those words stood as an affront to all they represented—and she would not let that insult go unaddressed!

"We will not give up and sit silently, waiting for death to claim us. We will fight to the very end, until even our final breath abandons us. There were people who lived by those words, and they believed I could be like them. And that's why we—why I—"

If one day, you make it to our final destination, would you please leave flowers?

To repay those words. To answer those feelings he'd entrusted her with.

We're off, Major.

Shin.

It's because you left me those words that I will definitely catch up to you someday.

"In order to catch up to them, who survived to the very end—so I can take them with me and go further than ever before, I will fight...! I am

Lieutenant Vladilena Milizé, commander of the old Republic defense forces, and I will never, ever, turn my back on this war!"

For a long moment, the Federacy craft looked down at her with what felt like stupefied surprise.

"...?! Major...?!"

The dumbfounded voice that crackled from the speaker had, for some reason, referred to her in a rank different from the one she'd identified herself with. The Republic and the Federacy used roughly the same terminology, but sometimes certain words had different meanings. It was especially true for military jargon. The same word might not specify the same rank.

After a long silence, where the Federacy officer seemed to be on the verge of saying something, he eventually spoke:

"...They're no doubt long dead by now. What duty do you have to the departed?"

His tone was terribly unnatural, as if he was trying to keep up appearances, and at the same time, it almost felt like...he was trying to cling to something. Like a lost child, timidly reaching out to a person they longed for. And it was because of that impression that she felt inclined to answer.

"They asked me to never forget them."

It was a wish she was entrusted with on a night where they stood under the same sky, looking up at flowers of different colors. When they exchanged an impossible promise to someday watch fireworks together.

I may not be able to act on that promise, but... No, that's wrong. That's not all. It's because I don't want to forget about him. He, who, for how indifferent he was, left so much behind. I don't want the last traces of him to disappear from this world... So long as I remember him, he will wait for me at his final destination.

"It was because they warned me about this catastrophe—that this large-scale offensive was coming—that I've been able to survive this long. It was because they wished for me to survive, because they told me that we would meet again someday, that I continue to fight. I'm alive, here and now, *because he was there.*"

"..."

"And that's why I want to answer those feelings. They may be gone, but I still wish to reach their final destination. To reach where they ended up while they still lived, and this time... Together..."

Since I can no longer hope to live alongside them...

"...I wish to fight together with them—to take them with me. Beyond this battlefield."

That answer made Shin let go of a long-held breath. Those words weren't directed at him the way he was now. She was only answering those unbearably embarrassing, saccharine words he'd spouted a year ago, when he didn't know what he truly wished for and what lay beyond that wish. And yet...

Because he was there.

I wish to fight together with them.

Those words made him happy.

His smile was faint. But there was no point in revealing his name now. After she spent a year fighting alone, following in their footsteps, the sight that greeted her shouldn't be on this battlefield, where he sat, paralyzed and defeated...

"...You're the same."

"...Huh?"

"It's as true for you as it was for him. It's because you fought to the bitter end, because you survived this far, that you're able to stand here today."

The sun rose, and fresh sunlight illuminated her features from the front.

"And I think that's something you can take pride in."

And in his first-ever sight of her, through the cracked optical screen, she wore a gentle smile...

The Federacy craft's red optical sensor looked down at Lena in silence. It seemed somehow a little more sober to her, as if something that had possessed it until now was absent from its artificial gaze. Something that had hung over it like a shadow, like the dust of battle or exhaustion, was gone now.

"...Major."

He parted his lips to speak with a hesitant awkwardness, wishing to say something but unsure of what. The external speaker's sound was thick with static, making it hard to discern his age, but Lena somehow felt he was the same age as she was.

"Major, I..."

A pause. Suddenly, the person behind the armored machine tensed up. The machine's optical sensor turned to the far north, where the Eintagsfliege's silvery clouds brewed ominously. After a brief moment, Shiden's voice moaned at her from inside Cyclops, standing next to her.

"Bad news, Your Majesty. I just got a report from Milan, up on the Gran Mur... There's Legion heading our way!"

"Oh no! You, from the Federacy, evacuate with us..."

"...No."

The voice that prickled her ears, mixed with heavy static, belonged to neither Shiden nor the Federacy officer. A flock of air-to-air missiles rushed from the east into the northern skies, penetrating the silver clouds and blooming into flowers of flames. A second volley drew an arc and fell into the ground beneath the Eintagsfliege—into the Legion swarming there.

The angular silhouette of a combat helicopter flew in from over the ridgeline, its rotor thundering around them, accompanied by a formation of low-altitude-flight utility helicopters and transport choppers. The voice of its pilot crackled from the helicopter's outer speaker, disturbing the crisp morning air.

"A job well done, First Lieutenant. Leave the rest to us."

The utility helicopters filled with armored infantry, as well as the larger transport helicopters, touched down on the red battlefield. The petals were torn away and blown off by their intense downburst, drawing red patterns over the azure sky. Armored infantry equipped with heavy assault rifles ran around, deploying over the area.

Shin watched through his cracked optical screen as a squadron rushed over to Lena and the Juggernaut. Lena, at first, seemed rather taken aback as the armored infantry, clad in black metal, approached her. But she was filled with relief when one of them raised his helmet and revealed his face.

The way she simply handed over her assault rifle when asked made him think she truly hadn't changed. He watched absentmindedly as they seemed to have trouble adapting to how the situation had changed rapidly and, after some discussion, opened the black Juggernaut's canopy, when his RAID Device activated.

"...Are you all right, Shin?"

The voice of the man who spoke to him wasn't that of the chief of staff or the division commander.

"I see the cavalry arrived on time. We had to pull emergency forces from the other fronts to accommodate the change in plans, though."

Shin sighed at the annoyingly prideful voice of the man on the other side of the Resonance. He was saved. He was really, truly saved.

"Ernst. When we get back, I'll have to throw something at you."

Maybe a can of paint would suffice. With the lid off, of course.

"What—? Why all of a sudden?! Why do I deserve this treatment when I'm just worried for my adorable children!?"

Shin cut out the call. A few moments later, Frederica grimaced at him, pressing a hand on her own RAID Device.

"I sympathize with your feelings on the matter, Shinei, truly I do, but answer him. That foolish paper pusher started weeping crocodile tears in my ears, and it is ever so irritating."

He'd tossed his RAID Device away when he shut out the call, so he reluctantly accepted Frederica's RAID Device and reconnected it.

"You're still on the front lines, Ernst?"

"Come now, I'm the Federacy military's supreme commander. How could I not be on the front lines at times like this?"

"If the president, even a temporary one, takes a stray bullet while running around the battlefield, it'll be a crisis."

"Even a temporary one... If that happens, it happens, and the vice president will take over for me. Why do you think we even have that role anyway?"

It may have made sense, but it was still crazy to hear, especially coming so pleasantly and easily from the temporary president of a country.

"According to the report from the advance forces, you've already made contact with them... After this operation is concluded, the Federacy military will begin carrying out a rescue operation in the Republic of San Magnolia. Deployed United Kingdom drones intercepted their wireless transmissions. The three countries held a

conference, and we decided that abandoning them after we acknowledged them as survivors would be inhumane. And we've also recognized that if they build a second Morpho and encamp it in fortified Republic territory, it would be far too grave of a threat."

"..."

"From the Federacy's perspective, this is also a rescue operation for our brethren... Eighty-Six, like you. But I suppose that isn't a homeland you wish to return to, is it? If you say you don't want to fight to save your oppressors, we can send you back after the main force advances..."

"No."

He shook his head.

"I'll stay here. I don't really want to save the Republic... But there are people there I don't want to leave to their fates."

"...I see."

On the other side of the Resonance, he felt the person who was technically his adoptive father smile faintly.

"Yes. In addition...if you've completed the mission objective, please report it properly, First Lieutenant Nouzen. It's fine that you didn't this time, since the others gave their report on your behalf."

Shin looked up in surprise.

"There are survivors?"

"...That should be the first thing you ask, asshole."

He looked up nonchalantly as another voice cut into the conversation. Raiden.

"Believe it or not, the whole squad, the lieutenant colonel included, survived. If anything, with the way you ragdolled off the Morpho after that explosion, I was worried you might've been the one to kick the bucket... Only a little worried, though."

"Kurena cried like a baby again. It was hell. Apparently, her RAID Device got wrecked when she got attacked, and she only tried to Resonate with you."

"I did not cry!"

"It wasn't only your fault this time, but this is the second time you made poor Kurena cry, you know? Could you please stop pulling crazy stunts like that?"

His comrades, who had apparently regrouped, kept clamoring over the Resonance. He didn't know if it was heaven or hell, but whatever the afterlife was, it seemed to hate these guys as much as it hated him. Looking up, he saw a small group clad in flight suits leaning out of the window and waving at him from the utility helicopter flying in midair—and a tall silhouette walking their way from a hill three kilometers away.

It looked like, this time, not a single one of them...went ahead of him.

The moment he sighed in relief, all strength abandoned him. Several days' worth of exhaustion—and the strain of his concentration being pushed to the limits in the last battle—hit him in the form of light vertigo. As he closed his eyes, Ernst, apparently understanding perfectly what was happening, spoke.

"You did well, Shin. Leave retaking the beachhead to the advance party and get some rest."

“—Roger.”

“Also, Frederica. Once you get back, prepare yourself for some serious discipline.”

Frederica gulped audibly, and as she looked up at Shin as if pleading for help, he spoke into the Resonance:

“I’ll pack her up in a container and send her over.”

“Shinei?! You dare betray me?!”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’ll be counting on you, Big Brother.”

Leaving that laughter as his parting remark, Ernst shut down the Resonance. Frederica, on the other hand, turned her face away in a sulking gesture.

“...I cannot return until we regroup with the main force anyway. I shall only come back when you return to the Federacy.”

“It’s not like we need you as a hostage anymore.”

“So it seems.”

Giving a dissatisfied “Hmph,” Frederica craned her neck to look up at him. With how cramped the cockpit was, she was sitting on his knees, making it so her head reached his chest.

“That stupid paper pusher cut into the conversation at the worst possible time and ruined everything. Are you sure you should not have mentioned your name to her, though? Was she not your superior officer in the Republic?”

“...I don’t recall ever telling you about the major.”

Shin realized only as he spoke.

Oh, right.

“Have you forgotten about my power? The ability to see the past and present of those I know runs through my veins.”

...That’s right.

Her red eyes glimmered like a kitten that had cornered a baby mouse, making Shin feel that it would probably be for the best to not ask exactly what she saw.

“The memories I see are whatever the person I’m observing is recalling at the moment, even if only subconsciously. When that woman named herself, you were uncharacteristically surprised. So I saw the nature of what connection you had...”

Well, this sucks.

“I believe you said something to the effect of ‘We’re off’...? Surely you’re pleased that she came after you, no? Are you sure you’re all right with not giving her your name after she so gallantly followed in your footsteps?”

Looking at Frederica smirking at him, Shin sighed lightly. Something really annoyed him about the way she was freely teasing him like this... But it also felt like the first time she made a face fitting for a girl her age.

“...I can’t give her my name yet.”

Not when he was only seeking a place to die and hadn't progressed at all since the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

"If she says she's caught up, I can't let this be what she sees at the end of that road. What she sees when she catches up to us shouldn't be..."

Him kneeling down on this crumbled earth.

"...shouldn't be this battlefield."

Frederica sighed with astonishment.

"How do I put this...? You truly are a boy after all."

"...?"

"I am saying you are the kind of creature who puts on airs at the oddest of times."

Leaving that exasperated remark, Frederica gave him a sidelong glance and cocked an eyebrow.

"Incidentally, did you notice? What you just said was your answer."

Frederica's eyes sparkled proudly for some reason at his surprised countenance.

"The final destination that girl reaches must be a grand spectacle that was worth the effort she expended in making it there. And the path she follows is the one you leave in your wake... Bearing this in mind, where is it that you should be headed?"

You've just found the answer to that question all by yourself...

Those crimson eyes—so much like his own—looked back at him, smiling softly.

EPILOGUE

WE'LL MEET AGAIN

<No Face to first wide area network.>

<All phases of operation concluded.>

<Operation complete. All Legion belonging to first wide area network are to suspend combat.>

<Retreat to Legion-controlled territory.>

†

It could be concluded that the first multinational joint operation since the outbreak of the war with the Legion was a success. That said, they failed in retaking the entirety of the Legion's territories, but the opinion of the three countries was that the line they captured along the Highway Corridor and to the west of it would be pivotal in expanding their spheres of influence.

The Legion failed in an offensive that took years to prepare for, and having been forced into retreat, they likely wouldn't be able to promptly recommence their invasion.

If the forces of humankind stood together, it was possible to resist the Legion. And that was a faint yet monumental hope.

†

"That said, this isn't a situation where we can rest on our laurels."

Outside the window was a view of light morning snow falling on the Federacy capital, Sankt Jeder. Standing before the large desk in the president's office, the western front's army's chief of staff and the commander of the 177th Armored Division spoke.

"We've lost well over sixty percent of the western front's army. We don't have enough standard troops to fill in the numbers, so we're talking with every military academy, special officer academy, and conscription camp to push their curriculums forward, as well as pushing for more reserves. We can't afford to have insufficient training, though. And encouraging more to join the conscription camps will lead to a decline in our national power."

During wartime, the military is the kind of industry that consumes large amounts of resources and manpower despite not producing anything. And so the age groups in charge of production activities and increasing the population are forced to flow into the army's pool of personnel, gradually chipping away at the country's potential national power. The United Kingdom and the Alliance were likely facing similar hardships. Their total

population was shrinking, but the situation could very well only be becoming more and more severe.

"By contrast, we may have decreased the Legion's main forces, but the Weisel and the Admiral remain intact. And since they're mass-produced weapons, their reproduction speed is incredibly rapid compared to our own... The war situation is only going to become worse going forward."

"You don't have to beat around the bush, Major General. What you're trying to say is that if we keep with our current strategy of slow, gradual advance, humankind will be stomped out and defeated before we manage to retake the continent... Correct?"

"Yes. And therefore, I think we need to reconsider our approach for this war..."

Even regardless of that, if another attack on the same scale was mounted against them, they would not be able to push them back. Such was the military's perspective after how, despite having achieved all their objectives during the large-scale offensive and the Morpho takedown operation, the Legion still had the initiative and led them by the nose, forcing them to suffer massive losses.

"While keeping with our gradual advance, we will employ limited offensive strategies. While we hold on to our defensive lines as before, we will establish and deploy a special, independent force focused on launching concentrated attacks on important strategic points for the Legion. And while they were the first candidates I nominated out of everyone on the western front, I was surprised to see you come up with the same suggestion, Your Excellency."

They—who were without a doubt elites even within a militaristic country like the Federacy.

"The Eighty-Six. The young soldiers we've rescued from the former Republic's borders will make up the mobile strike force... With all due respect, Your Excellency, I never would have expected you to offer up those children as a sacrifice for the country's peace."

"Even if I was to speak against it, they wished to enlist—and as frontline soldiers, at that. There's no point in arguing."

Ernst responded quietly, looking out the window at the sights of a snowy Sankt Jeder, where tumultuous preparations were underway for the Eve of the Holy Birthday, the very symbol of winter.

"They have their own set of values, and I haven't the right to disregard them because they don't align with my own. If they still choose the battlefield, the least I can do is let them stay together, and besides, with regards to Shin...to *Captain Nouzen*, I still feel a need to *keep him out of danger*, you see."

He looked down at the electronic document deployed in a hologram in midair. The personnel files of espers belonging to the Federacy had a special mark applied to them. This personnel file had the mark emblazoned

on it in striking color and was filled with countless columns of text, special mentions regarding the latest sequence of operations.

"In addition to making concentrated strikes on strategic points for the Legion, the strike force is also to be dispatched to our neighboring countries as reinforcements. Said countries will also be placing their own guest officers in the unit, so it will surely draw attention from the outside... As convenient a warning device as he might be, I won't let you use him as a guinea pig."

While the major general stiffened at the sidelong glance cast his way, the chief of staff merely scoffed.

"It saddens me to see you suspect our army to be so morally depraved, Your Excellency."

Contrary to his words, the chief of staff wore a smile that almost seemed to boast of his faults, and he tilted his head to one side.

"Will said Captain Nouzen really consent to the idea of these guest officers, though? Isn't the officer being chosen for his division, who he will be under the direct command of, one of his former persecutors?"

"He's already been told the news. He came back yesterday to take a leave of absence."

Ernst shrugged as the chief of staff raised an eyebrow. The Nordlicht squadron—Shin included—had participated in the battle to retake the former Republic of San Magnolia's administrative Sectors. They'd managed to retake everything up to the First Sector, after which they were locked in a stalemate, alternated with another force that took over for them, and retreated along with the rest of their main force.

Combatants that fight nonstop for a certain period of time suffer a significant drop in their combat efficiency. Being a former war-oriented country that spent almost all its time dealing in nothing but war even in its current incarnation, the Federacy knew very well the importance of routine alternation of forces and allowing for rest. However brief it was, these children would need time to rest.

"I was also worried about that, but it seems my concerns were unfounded. After all..."

†

As soldiers only wore their uniforms on official occasions, Shin draped his heavy military coat over his uniform as he walked through the Federacy capital's streets. The national cemetery, which occupied a large section of Sankt Jeder's suburbs, was hazy with powdery snow. Under a bright sky blanketed in white, the grove of lilac trees surrounding the graveyard stood with all its leaves blown away, exposing its black bark to the will of the frigid winds. The gauzelike curtain of snow painted a monochrome picture against the black tombstones, and the shadows of other soldiers, of various

ages and genders, who had just returned from the western front, stood solemnly between them.

During the winter, they would be decorated with flakes of snow. In spring, they would be decorated with lilac petals; in summer, by the roses blossoming in the shadows of the trees; and during autumn, by a field of scarlet sages. Such flowers would be an offering for the spirits of fallen heroes.

It came to Shin's mind that he never did see the cemetery during any other season but winter. There was so much he hadn't seen yet. He stopped in a section of the cemetery filled with new graves, in front of a single unassuming tombstone.

“—It's been a while, Eugene.”

EUGENE RANTZ

That name was etched into the stone pillar, with only seventeen years between the date of his birth and that of his death. Snow that had fallen through the night and all the way until this morning piled up solemnly and quietly over the graveyard, painting everything with a faint alabaster veneer.

“Sorry. It took me a while to come visit.”

Eugene wasn't there. And even if half of his remains were buried down there, his wishes and memories weren't there anymore. To Shin, who could hear the voices of ghosts—of memories and fragmented wills that remained in the world of the living—this wasn't a question of values or of the god he believed in. It was cold, hard fact. There was neither a heaven nor a hell. The dead all equally returned to the darkness in the depths of this world.

And that was why the person he was talking to was none other than the Eugene of his memories. But oddly enough, he still felt like he needed this impersonal stone slate, which had his name carved on it, in order to truly face him.

Once all those who knew him were gone, this hunk of stone, which bore only his name and dates of birth and death, would be nothing but a record. But all those who died and returned to nothingness, be they Federacy soldiers who left behind grave markers, or his 576 comrades from the Eighty-Sixth Sector, who'd entrusted him with their names on aluminum-alloy shards, never truly wished for a tombstone. All they wanted was for someone to remember that they were here.

“The western front's the same as it was when you were there. We held the line, somehow.”

He left the bouquet he'd bought at the entrance of the cemetery in front of Eugene's grave. It was a bouquet of white lilies raised in a greenhouse to withstand the Federacy's cold winter. Placing them against the polished black-granite tombstone brought out their gorgeous white in all its splendor.

When the old flower-vendor woman saw he was a soldier—which she probably realized at a glance, given his uniform—she pretty much pushed

the bundle of flowers into his arms, insisting he take them for free. An old woman, standing in front of a national graveyard this early in the morning, running a flower stand. As if to say that was her mission, with her lips pursed and her back straightened.

"All the Eighty-Six who survived in the Republic were given shelter by the Federacy, and now a new unit is being organized, with them as the core. A mobile unit specialized in operating Juggernauts. Once my leave ends, I'll be assigned there, too."

The number of its ranks was only slightly under ten thousand troops, making it the size of a large brigade. The majority of surviving Processors enlisted into the Federacy's army, reaching the same decision Shin and his group had come to only a year earlier.

"...You asked me once about what I fight for."

To be exact, he was about to ask, but was cut off halfway through, in what would be the last time they met before it all ended. Neither Shin nor Eugene thought it would be their last conversation. Death came equally to all—and just as suddenly. And that was why, at the very least, one had to live each moment in a way they wouldn't come to regret. They, the Eighty-Six, pledged to live and fight on while embracing that pride. Because they didn't have anything else to cling to yet.

"If I'm being honest, I still don't really know. We... I don't think I have the sort of reason to fight that you were thinking about. I've got nowhere to come back to and nowhere to go. Nothing...and no one to defend."

His family was gone, and he had no culture to draw on, as it was all within the memories of his homeland, which had been destroyed a long time ago. And then, with the voices of the ghosts as his way markers and the countless memories of his comrades etched into his heart, he'd pressed onward with nothing but the desire to end his brother as his sole motivator. And now that his brother was gone, looking to the future ahead was still too hard for Shin. Both the distant future, which he didn't know if he would live to see, and even the tomorrow that lay directly ahead of him were both so hazy and vague. It was difficult for him to look up at them.

He still had nothing to look forward to and nothing to live for. But...

"But if there's one thing I understood... It's that I don't want the sight I show to them, to everyone I promised to take with me, to be another battlefield."

Or to *her*, the girl he'd told a year ago that he was going on ahead, who'd fought all alone ever since, struggling to survive on the Republic's battlefield. For the girl who tried so hard to catch up to them, showing her a battlefield where he lay beaten and defeated at the end of it all would be far too cruel. He didn't leave her with those words on the final night before the Special Reconnaissance mission, with the possibility that help may come and the imploration to fight on until it did, because he wanted her to see this.

"...And the sea."

When was it that Eugene stood before him, saying he wanted to show his little sister, who had never seen the ocean, that scenery? Something she had never seen and never known?

"I still can't say I want to see it, really. But I do want to show it to others. To show others things they don't know. Things they've never seen before. I think that's all the reason I need to fight for now."

The Legion stood in the way of that wish. It couldn't come true with the world as it currently was. Of course, the tombstone said nothing in reply. Eugene's ghost wasn't there. But he still thought he could hear his amiable, kindhearted friend saying with a smile, "Sounds good enough to me."

"I'll come visit you again... And next time, I'll bring you stories of places you've never seen before."

The tombstone said nothing, and as if in its place, the bustling of the ghosts silently crept into his consciousness. The fragments of his dead comrades' consciousness that were still trapped on the battlefield, whispering their final moments as they sought release.

I haven't forgotten about you guys, either.

He turned on his heels silently, when he saw a figure raising a hand to him from the distance. It looked like Eugene—and his brother who had long since disappeared—and when he looked at it again, it turned into a silhouette of a long-haired girl who was disappearing into the snowy veil of winter. It looked like Kaie and, at the same time, like the girl who had caught up to him before he knew it. Both the dead who had already passed on and those who still wandered the battlefield. Before Shin knew it, they stood shoulder to shoulder, pursuing the comrades who were not yet there.

The countless heroes who slept there for eternity watched over the Reaper silently as he left the cemetery, covered in powdery snow.

The old lady always standing in front of the *nasshinal grabe yard*'s entrance asked if she came to visit her brother again and gave her some flowers for free. Holding a bouquet of lilies that was too large for her small body to carry, Nina walked down the now-familiar path to her brother's grave. Over the past six months or so, Nina finally realized that her brother dying meant he would never come back, and she would never see him again. That her brother was killed by someone and would never return because of that person.

That was sad, painful, wholly unbearable, so she lashed out against that person in her letter, but no answer ever came. Maybe they were simply such an awful person that they wouldn't write back, or maybe they never got the letter at all. The *wor* apparently became worse, and a lot of people died, so maybe that bad person died, too.

Nina thought that if he went to heaven, he should tell Eugene he was really sorry. Eugene was nice, so he would definitely forgive him. And then they could be friends there. Hurting someone made her feel prickly and bad. It probably wasn't a good thing to do.

She approached her brother's grave, only to find a shade of milky white different from the snow. Nina tottered over and picked it up... It was a bouquet of lilies. The snow hadn't piled over them yet, so they had probably just been placed by the grave. She saw a retreating figure walking quite a distance away in the walkway between the gravestones. It was a boy, a bit taller than Eugene, dressed in the same steel-blue uniform she last saw her brother wear. He looked familiar somehow—as if she'd seen him and Eugene laugh together at one point.

"...Um!"

She gave a faint utterance in spite of herself, which should not have reached beyond the curtain of snow. Was he coming here? For remembering? Or maybe...for not dying like Eugene did and coming back alive? Little Nina didn't know what spurred her to say the next words. And yet, she felt compelled to say them all the same.

"Um... Thank you very much..."

This little girl's voice, which had scant experience with shouting, could not have penetrated the buffering curtain of white to reach him. And despite that, she thought she saw the hazy figure on the other side of the snow turn to look at her.

†

It was at that small spring garden where the Juggernauts and their faithful attendant at the end of their journey rested forever. A young Federacy officer, likely her age and clad in a steel-blue Federacy uniform, smiled at her peacefully.

"This isn't the first time we've met. Although, I suppose it is the first time we're meeting face-to-face."

Lena still had no way of knowing the reason for the flood of emotions contained in that statement.

"It's been a while, *Handler One*. My name is Shinei Nouzen: a captain of the Federacy military and former leader of the Spearhead squadron."

Her expression turned utterly astonished. Lena's large silvery eyes widening in surprise, she looked up at the young man who presented himself to her. A boy roughly her age, barely old enough to have recently graduated from the special officer academy but already promoted twice to receive the captain's rank insignia on his collar. His black Onyx hair and crimson Pyrope eyes. His white, handsomely sculpted face.

Lena never did know his face. The quality of the picture she had was too rough and distant to make out anyone's features. But his voice... That serene, gentle voice, which was somehow pleasant despite being so curt...

".....Shin...?"

Sure enough, the boy broke into a wry smile.

"It's the first time you've called me by that name. Yes, it's me, Major Milizé."

"You're...alive..."

"I am. I failed to die again."

That cold tone. That blunt manner of speaking. The tears welled up in her eyes before she even knew it, but she restrained them with all her might. She didn't want to look away because of her tears. She felt that if she looked again—if she so much as blinked—he would disappear again.

So instead, she smiled from the bottom of her heart. Her expression was probably terribly awkward, but she couldn't care less about that right now. She wondered what had happened to him over these two long years while the Republic had stagnated and eventually collapsed. How they crossed the Legion's territories to reach foreign lands and came to wear the uniform of a different military.

But even without asking, she knew they'd probably kept on fighting for these two years. Because it was them, the ones who set out on their road, with the resolve to fight on as their pride.

"...I've always, always chased after you."

The smile in his red eyes deepened.

"I know."

"And I finally caught up to you."

"You did."

For some reason, it didn't feel like it had been that long since she'd heard his serene voice. She took his extended hand with both of hers. The tears she'd held back until now finally flowed freely, but her earnest smile never wavered. She'd thought she would never get to speak these words aloud, but she could finally say them now.

"From this day forth, I, too, will fight by your side."

AFTERWORD

Let's hear it for long-distance weapons!

Hello and good day, everyone, this is Asato Asato.

Things like heavy artillery and missiles are often looked down upon in these kinds of robot stories, so I wanted to let them take center stage for once. Don't you just want to see the ace's rig get blown away by suppressive fire without a hint of elegance or coolness left to them? Because I love seeing that. I love seeing that so much.

Which is why this time, the enemy is
a Railgun
on
railway artillery!!!

The modern-day super-long-distance cannon, the railgun, and World War II's super-long-distance cannon, the railway gun, in a duet you can only dream of!

...Yes, forgive me; I just really wanted to do this. Realism be damned.

And I apologize for the long wait, but 86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 3: Run Through the Battlefield (Finish) is finally here.

When I was only working on the plot, *Run Through the Battlefield* was supposed to be a lighter story. After all, considering how grim Volume 1 was, I thought, let's just go with what the name says and make this a story about the Eighty-Six running through a new battlefield! But somehow, once I got down to it, it turned out to be nowhere near as easy a story as I had thought it'd be.

You'll have to read to find out just how difficult of a story it is, but if you ask for my opinion as the author, it's because of Shin's plot-crushing ways. How in the world did both the progression and conclusion of the plot end up being so different that the only part that remained unchanged from early drafts ended up just being "The enemy is a Railgun"...?!

Anyway, here's this time's commentary:

- The Nachzehrer:

A chimera-like product of Caspian Sea Monster + the specs of the world's largest transport plane, the AN 225 Mriya + the likeness of the B2 Spirit stealth bomber. It's worth noting this class of weapon does exist in the real world, but its specs and usage are entirely different.

Yes, I really wanted to do this, so realism be damned (omitted).

- "The hell you all love so much is headed our way!"

This line, spoken in [chapter 7](#), was inspired by something an editor in charge of me, Kiyose, said when the book's manga adaptation was announced. (Not in the sense of the situation going south, but rather that things were going to become busy going forward. It was said in jest, to be clear.) The moment I heard that, I thought the sergeant absolutely had to say this line! And I've been sitting on that idea ever since.

- Fido:

Talking just about Kiyose is a bit unfair, so this one's about my other editor, Tsuchiya. I-IV's cute designs were only half the reason Fido got revived after getting trashed at the end of Volume 1. The other reason was Tsuchiya's overwhelming love for Fido.

I mean, Tsuchiya kept bugging me about whether Fido was coming back or not every time we met...

Lastly, some thanks.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. Thank you so much for always reining me in whenever I got a bit too wild and for reining Shin in whenever he was about to lose his way.

To Shirabii. Almost this entire volume ended up being one huge battle scene! Which means it's full of cool illustrations. I'm sorry for dropping so much work on you.

To I-IV. This time, we had two Goliaths, and they were both so impressive...! I've been wanting to include a long-distance artillery cannon ever since we had you for mechanical design, so I'm very excited.

To the manga's author, Yoshihara. Every time I see your detailed character portraits and impressive storyboards, I keep thinking, *I want to read this so much!* I can't wait for the serialization to begin. I want to read it so much...!

And to all you readers, who took up this book. Thank you so, so much. With Volume 3, Shin finally got his time in the spotlight, but I'd be happy if you could hold him dear to your hearts even after this.

Next up, Volume 4 will be a light story! A really light story about how he and Lena and the other Eighty-Six finally come face-to-face and have a little chitchat! I'll meet you again then!

In any case, I hope that, for even a short while, I managed to show you that path leading up to the sunset, to the battlefield he wanders through, where the crimson dusk and lapis lazuli night come together.

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Seirankeppūroku"
by Ali Project

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